

Out of the Cage

It was warmer outside than he thought—enough to make him think he did not need the coat he had worn out that day. Takafumi Douno was sitting on a park bench, absently watching his daughter, Honoka, play in the sand. She was turning four this year.

The three of them had gone out shopping when his wife, Mariko, said she had forgotten to buy something. When she explained that it was dish detergent, Douno offered to go back and buy it for her.

"But you don't know which brand we use, do you?" Mariko had answered him, hunching her shoulders.

Schools were out for the spring holidays, and it was a sunny Sunday afternoon. There were many children in the park who looked about primary-school age. Douno remembered Mariko mentioning she wanted a second child. He liked children and they were dear to him, but his low salary made it hard to say yes.

"Daddy, come here!" He went to the sandbox where his daughter beckoned. In it was a misshapen triangle made of sand.

"Honoka's house," she tilted her head and grinned. Douno bent down and brushed the sand off her checkered dress and hands.

"Mommy's coming back soon," he told her. "Why don't we wait at the bench over there?" Just as he began to lead his daughter by the hand to the bench where their shopping bags were set down, a voice called him from behind.

"Excuse me—" Douno turned around to see a tall man standing there. The man thrust a map out towards him, his head slightly bowed.

"I want you tell me—is this park where I'm in right now?"

Douno remembered that voice. *Could it be—?* He stared hard at the man in front of him. It had been six years since then, and his hair had grown out. His head was not shaved anymore. He was also not wearing a grey prison uniform, but a normal white shirt and black pants.

"I don't understand this map, and I can't read the *kanji*.¹" The man looked up at him. His eyes snapped open in surprise.

"Takafumi."

When Kitagawa called his name, Douno felt both happiness and uncertainty swell in his chest in a tangled mass.

"Takafumi, Takafumi!" The wind was knocked out of him as he was met with an embrace. He felt his spine tingle. The man's arms were also shaking slightly as they encircling his shoulders.

"I've—I've finally found you."

A middle-aged woman passed by, looking at them apprehensively. Douno realized how abnormal it was for two men to be hugging like this.

"Let go of me for a minute—I can't breathe," was his excuse as he pushed the man's shoulders away.

Kitagawa wore a boyish grin from ear to ear as he stroked Douno's cheek with his thumb.

"Your hair is longer. And you've gotten old. Your face looks different."

1 Chinese characters used in the Japanese language. Almost all place names and names of people are in *kanji*.

Douno smiled wryly at being called old.

"I'm only thirty-six," he said.

"I turned thirty-four." Kitagawa gripped Douno's left hand. "Take me to your house. I have so many things I want to tell you. Oh, I should've brought my notebook. I drew tons of pictures. Everyone who sees them says they're nice, so I'm sure you'll—"

"Daddy."

The man stopped talking at Honoka's voice. He furrowed his brow and stared down at Douno's young daughter.

"Who's this little kid?"

Douno's hand trembled as it sat on his daughter's shoulder. Kitagawa had approached him just as he would have six years ago, but Douno did not know how the man would respond to being told the truth. Douno was afraid. But he could not keep silent forever; Kitagawa would find out eventually anyway.

"She's my daughter."

The man's mouth twitched.

"I got married five years ago."

The man's eyes, which had been glowing with happiness, clouded grey in an instant. His gaze wandered left and right as if he were lost, then he hung his head. His grip on Douno's left hand tightened, as if he were angry. Detached, yet passionate—memories of this man's violence resurfaced in Douno's mind, making him shudder.

"You were always on my mind," Douno said hesitantly. "I was wondering what you've been up to since getting out. So I'm happy I was able to see you again." He did not mean to be sucking up. His feelings were sincere, yet his voice sounded even to his own ears like he was making excuses.

"What kind of work do you do now? Are you getting along with your co-workers? I'm happy to hear you still draw. You were really good at it."

He was intimidated by the man's gaze, which almost looked like a glare. He forced his words out anyway.

"I'm glad you seem to be doing well."

"Honey," he heard Mariko's voice calling from afar. He turned around to see her coming at a jog with a small plastic bag in hand.

"I'm sorry I ended up taking so long. I remembered all sorts of other things we forgot to buy."

Douno hastily let go of Kitagawa's hand as he saw Mariko's gaze fix on their linked hands. A strand of hair had fallen across Mariko's cheek, and she tucked it behind her ear as she tilted her head.

"Is that gentleman someone you know?"

"Oh—yeah. He's an old friend, and we just bumped into each other."

"I see," Mariko murmured. "Hello. Nice to meet you, I'm Douno's wife," she said in greeting. The man stared silently at Mariko. Mariko, flustered at being stared at with no answer, glanced nervously at Douno.

Honoka clung to his wife's legs. "Pick-up!" she said, pulling her skirt.

"Oh my, aren't you a little baby," teased Mariko, picking Honoka up in her arms. The awkwardness of the silence seemed to lift a little.

"Honey, if you're going to have a talk with your friend, should I head home first?"

I don't want to be alone with him. It was Douno's honest thought. He was happy to see Kitagawa. He really was. But once they were alone, who knew what the man might say?

"No, uh..." Douno mumbled incoherently.

"I'm going home," the man muttered. "I live far away. I'm going back."

"Where did you come from?" asked Mariko.

"Shizuoka," the man answered without looking up.

"From so far away! Are you here for work?"

The man fell silent again. Suddenly, he lifted his head and looked at Douno.

"Tell me your address."

"Hold on, I need something to write with, and some paper..." Douno automatically reached into the breast pocket of his jacket, even though there was nothing there. At work, he always kept a pen in that pocket.

"I'll just memorize it. It's not much."

Douno's fading memories of prison came back to him. As a principle rule, inmates were not allowed to exchange addresses, in order to avoid conflict after getting out. If even a scrap of paper with an address was found on an inmate, he would be punished. Everyone memorized the addresses of people they needed to contact once they were out of prison.

When Douno told him his address, the man listened but did not confirm or ask to hear it again. His mouth moved voicelessly, as if to recite it to himself. As soon as his lips stopped, he turned his back to Douno and walked away.

He never said "See you again" or "Goodbye."

"He's kind of different," Mariko murmured, once the man's white shirt was nowhere to be seen in the park. "And he seemed a little scary."

Douno could not argue, knowing how overpowering the full force of Kitagawa's anger could be.

Once they returned to their apartment, Douno played with their daughter while his wife prepared dinner. While he kept his daughter company, Douno thought about Kei Kitagawa.

Douno and Kitagawa had spent about nine months together in the same prison cell. Douno had been imprisoned on groping charges even though he had done nothing—it had been a false accusation. Kitagawa had served time for close to ten years for murder, and he was an expert at prison life.

Even though he was skilled at getting by in prison, Kitagawa did not know how to believe in people, how to love; he did not know what it felt like to receive kindness. Douno felt as if his unhappy upbringing, absent of a loving mother, had something to do with his crime. Even in prison, Kitagawa was always surrounded by inmates who were only concerned about taking advantage of people's weaknesses to make a profit.

Douno had reached out, wanting to become closer with him. At first, Kitagawa responded like a wild animal, with apprehension.

But once the binding cords fell away from his heart, Kitagawa began to like him more than as a friend. He had whispered "I love you" even though were both men, and he had even begun talking about living together once they were out of prison.

Days before Douno's release, Kitagawa had gotten into a fistfight in their cell and been sent into punishment. Douno emerged from prison without saying good-bye or exchanging promises. He did not tell Kitagawa his address. If he had really wanted to, he could have asked a trustworthy inmate who lived in the same cell as him. But he had not.

If they had been able to get on as friends, if Kitagawa had not told him he loved him, if he had not been so violently emotional that he was blinded to anything else when it came to Douno, he would have wanted to keep in contact even after Kitagawa was out of prison. Douno liked Kei Kitagawa as a person, but those feelings were not equal to those of love.

Douno could not accept the man and his love with open arms, so he decided not to see him. He did not tell Kitagawa his address, and he did not pick Kitagawa up on the day of his release.

But his feelings remained. The feelings Kitagawa had shown him, his own feelings of wanting to do something for Kitagawa, remained with him.

When they reunited after six years, Kitagawa had not changed at all. His demeanour, the way he talked. But what about his feelings? Did Kitagawa still love him and want to live with him?

Did he perhaps think he'd been betrayed? *I loved him so much, but he went and got married. Even had children.* If that was how he really felt, would his anger and hatred at being betrayed drive him to do something serious? Like how he had attacked the inmate who made advances on Douno in their cell and punched him until he went limp?

I'm happy to see him. I'm glad to see he's doing well. Douno's feelings were not false, yet he found himself afraid of Kitagawa. The man was blinded by his temper sometimes, but Douno knew Kitagawa was not underhanded. He was certain that Kitagawa would not harm his family out of vengeance, but still, he was unable to deny the possibility. Human feelings were prone to influence and change.

He had told Kitagawa his address. If Kitagawa wanted to know, did that mean he planned to come again? Perhaps it had been better not to tell him. But in that situation, Douno knew he would have been unable to say no.

Douno hugged his daughter as she sat in his lap. He prayed that his reunion with Kitagawa would not threaten this modest happiness he had found.

The next day after their reunion, Douno's mind was full of thoughts about Kitagawa for the entire day. Even while he was working, he felt like Kitagawa would suddenly appear from the shadows, and his foolish thoughts made him restless. His senior, Tatsuta, seemed to observe it as a sign of giddiness, for he teased Douno and asked him if anything good had happened lately.

After getting out of prison, Douno found new employment as an accounting clerk at Iwai Foods through the help of a support group for those falsely-accused of groping. He had once worked as an accountant for city hall, and working with numbers was something he was good at. If he had anything to complain about, it was his low salary and the fact that he got barely any extra pay for overtime.

Tatsuta, a caring and considerate man, knew about Douno's situation. Tatsuta himself had past experiences of being victim to the police's unfair and overbearing questioning practices, and understood what Douno was going through. It was a great relief for Douno to not have to hide his past.

In the end, Kitagawa did not appear in front of Douno at all that day. It was not until evening the Douno realized it would have been impossible for Kitagawa to come anyway, especially after yesterday; if the man worked, it would be even harder to come down from Shizuoka on a weekday.

Two days passed, then three. Even after a week, there was no communication from Kitagawa. Since he did not know Douno's phone number, the only methods he had of contacting

him was a direct visit or a letter. But Douno received neither.

The cherry blossoms finished blooming beautifully. They fell and were replaced by deep green leaves, and Golden Week² was just days away. By this time, Douno had begun to think he would never see Kitagawa again.

Had the man's feelings diminished from seeing the reality of Douno in a marriage, or had he been happy enough to see him just once?

Douno wondered if their brief reunion in the park had been their last, and he forgot how afraid he was, or how he had feared for his family's safety. A loneliness welled up inside his chest. He wanted to try sending a letter, but since he had missed asking for Kitagawa's address, he could not send one even if he wanted to.

The skipping-stone series of Golden Week holidays passed as they entered mid-May. Douno came home one day to a dinner of cold *soba*.³

"*Soba* today? Looks good."

It had been very hot during the day. Though still a little early in the season, as Douno took off his suit jacket he felt that these kinds of dishes would become more and more attractive with the warmer weather.

"It's move-in *soba*," Mariko said as she took Douno's jacket from him.

"Oh, really?" Douno said as he loosened his tie. "What kind of neighbours are they?"

"He doesn't live in this building. It's from your friend, Mr. Kitagawa."

"What?" Douno asked in disbelief.

"He brought it for us because he moved nearby."

Douno felt a foreboding chill run down his spine.

"When was this?"

"About two hours ago, I think. He asked if you were home, and when I told him you were still at work, he left."

"His address—do you know his address?"

"I got his telephone number so you could thank him later," Mariko said.

Douno got the note from her and ran into his bedroom. With his cell phone in one hand, he stared at the memo. All he had to do was call this number, and it would get through to Kitagawa. He would be able to talk to him. As a responsible adult, he had to thank Kitagawa for the gift, at least.

Douno's fingers shook as they clenched around the phone. When Kitagawa didn't come, Douno wanted to see him and talk to him. But when he came too close, he suddenly felt afraid. Kitagawa lived all the way in Shizuoka—why had he moved in close by? What was the meaning behind his moving in close to Douno? What was he planning to do? Douno had no idea what the man was thinking—not the faintest clue.

Douno was unable to steel himself enough to hear Kitagawa's voice that day. He made the phone call instead on the next day, past eleven at night, because he felt like the more time he allowed to pass, the harder it would get to talk to Kitagawa. If he was going to thank the man for

2 A series of national holidays from the end of April to the beginning of May. Since they are only one or two days apart, usually companies will take the whole week off.

3 Buckwheat noodles, served in cold broth in warm weather. A popular summertime food.

4 A custom of handing out *soba* to new neighbours when moving in, as a way of introduction. The thin, long noodles symbolize the wish for a long-lasting relationship, and the word "*soba*" can also mean "close by" or "nearby".

the *soba*, he preferred it to be sooner than later.

"I'm going out to buy some beer," he told his wife, and walked out with his phone in hand. Suddenly, it began to drizzle, and Douno hurriedly climbed into the family car in the parking lot. It was an old subcompact car, and the driver's seat was cramped. Mariko had been talking about wanting a standard-sized car, but they were not financially comfortable enough to afford to get a new one.

Douno retrieved the note from his pocket and dialled the number. He could feel the pulse thudding in his fingers as the phone rang. On the fifth ring, he heard the phone being picked up. It was such a small thing, yet the tension was enough to make his heart almost stop.

"Hello?" The voice answered in tremendously bad humour.

"This is Douno speaking. Is this Mr. Kitagawa's residence?"

"Oh, it's you." Douno heard a stifled yawn on the other end. "I was wondering who was calling so late."

Douno hastily turned on the cabin light and checked his watch. It was five past eleven. For Douno, it was still early in the night, but perhaps Kitagawa had not yet grown out of his schedule in prison, where the lights were out at nine. If so, Douno would have woken him up from his sleep.

"I'm sorry for calling so late. I won't keep you for long. Thank you for the *soba* yesterday. I was surprised to hear you moved nearby."

"I wanted to be close to you."

Douno had already predicted his answer. *I knew it*, he couldn't help but think at the man's frank reply. Douno pressed his right hand against his forehead and closed his eyes.

"I've told you this already, but I'm married now."

"Yeah, I know."

"So... well... that means I can't be with you like I used to be."

When Douno and Kitagawa had lived in the same prison cell together, kissing and physical contact had been everyday things. Douno was not able to refuse when Kitagawa made moves to touch him. They were in a male-only environment, where even masturbation was prohibited. In this situation, even a man's touch was enough to make Douno erect, and drive him to ejaculate. Douno had had anal sex with the man once, but that was because he could not fight back against him, not because he had wanted it.

Just because he had been on intimate terms with a man did not mean that Douno was gay. Once he got out of prison and returned to society, all the people Douno found cute or sexually attractive were women.

There was no answer from Kitagawa. As the silence wore on, Douno stared absently at the droplets of rain hitting and bouncing off his windshield.

"I thought about it after I went back to Shizuoka," Kitagawa said. "I've been working at the same factory as Shiba since last year, and I told him about it, too. He said, 'Douno has his own life now. You need to give up and find yourself a nice wife.'"

Shiba was an inmate who had lived with Douno and Kitagawa in the same cell. He had been in his mid-fifties then; he was probably past sixty now. Douno did not expect to hear that Shiba and Kitagawa were still in contact.

"Shiba bought me a prostitute to liven things up. I made her suck my cock, then I boned her. I wonder how much it cost for those two hours. Anyway, before she went home, I told her she wasn't any different from my right hand, and she started crying." Kitagawa's voice was flat and

regular.

"When I told Shiba that, he told me I should've been nice to her because she was just doing her job. How was I supposed to be nice to a girl who lets me bone her and charges every two hours? Was I supposed to treat her to some desserts afterwards, or what? What do you think?"

Douno had no way to answer that.

"Well," he began, "I think it's very hard for a girl to have to give herself to someone she doesn't even love. But she's set that aside in order to do her job, so you would have to be considerate of her feelings, and... you probably should have avoided talking about the actual act."

Mm-hmm, Kitagawa responded. "I still don't really get it, though."

The rain was coming down harder. It made a racket as it drummed against the windshield and rooftop of the car.

"Is it raining over there?"

"Yes, it is," Douno answered.

"When I told Shiba I was moving close to your house, he was against it. He asked me what I was planning to do there. 'Even if you're with him, Douno won't be your Douno anymore. He has a wife and kid. A man should know when to back off,' he said."

Kitagawa cut off his sentence.

"I'm at least allowed to be close to you, aren't I? Even if you have a family?" His words sounded detached. "Can't I be allowed to think that when it's raining where I am, it'll be raining where you are? Can't I be close enough to walk over when I want to see your face?"

I just want to be close—to be near you. The man's plaintive plea moved Douno's heart deeply. Yet he had no idea if being close was a good thing for either Kitagawa or himself.

He could not return Kitagawa's feelings—this much was clear. But if he let Kitagawa remain like this, remain attached to him, would it not be stealing away Kitagawa's precious time?

Douno also had another small seed of worry. The man had said it was enough just to be close, just to see his face, but would he really be satisfied with just that? Once they were close, once they started talking... wouldn't Kitagawa begin to seek him physically, unable to hold in his desire?

"I searched for you once I got out of jail," Kitagawa continued. "I couldn't do it alone, so I asked detectives to do it. Apart from buying food, I used all the money I made to pay them. Detectives cost a hell of a lot of money, so I worked every day. There were easier ways to make money without having to do so much work, but if I got thrown into jail again I wouldn't be able to see you even if I found you. So I told myself I couldn't. People told me I was just wasting my money. But even then, I still wanted to see you."

"But," he continued, "my searching and wanting to see you is a one-sided thing. I love you, and as long as I have you I don't need anything else. But you don't love me as much as that."

Douno's breath caught in his throat.

"That's what you mean, right?"

Douno's hand shook as he held his cell phone.

"I thought I'd be free once I was out. I thought I'd be able to sleep with you all I wanted. But now I feel like you were closer to me in there than you are now."

"...It's getting late," Douno said after a long silence, and hung up on Kitagawa with that excuse. Still clutching his phone, he slumped over the steering wheel.

There was nothing he could do even if Kitagawa blamed him for not loving him back. For Douno, it was the truth. The feelings Kitagawa harboured for him pained him. The faithfulness thrust upon him was unbearably heavy.

I have to get back soon, or else Mariko will worry. Yet for a long time afterwards, Douno was unable to move from his car.

It was a chilly day, and it had been raining since morning. It hardly seemed like the end of May, when summer was beginning. It was cold enough to want a heater. Douno finished work early for once that day, at six in the evening. At the entrance to the office, he parted with Tatsuta, who was taking the train home. He went around to the employee parking lot behind the building. He had pinned his umbrella between his shoulder and neck while opening his bag to fish out his car keys when a voice called him from behind.

"Hey."

Thinking it was Tatsuta, Douno turned around. It was Kitagawa. Douno's shock made him drop his bag, which tipped over on its side on the wet ground. His empty lunchbox flew out of the open bag and slid across the ground to the feet of the man standing across from him.

As Douno picked up his bag, his empty lunchbox was thrust into his face.

"Th-Thank you." He took it hastily. Kitagawa was wearing a white shirt and black pants, and holding a clear plastic umbrella usually sold in convenience stores.

"I came to see you."

Douno had no idea what to do in response to that. He stood at a loss, with his bag still in his arms. The rain showed no signs of letting up, and he could feel his feet getting wet just standing there. He noticed Kitagawa's pants were darker from the knees down because they were wet as well.

"Let's get in the car for now. It's raining really hard."

"Okay," Kitagawa answered, and climbed into the passenger seat as he was told. Douno slid into the driver's seat and put his things in the back seat. He started the car and turned on the heater. He was cold himself, but Kitagawa also looked quite cold as he hugged his shoulders and shivered.

"I'm surprised you knew where I worked."

"I've followed you before. That's why I know what time you leave the house, what kind of car you drive, and where you work."

It was definitely not pleasant to know that he had been followed without knowledge, but watching Kitagawa's eyes crinkle as he grinned blissfully made Douno reluctant to reprimand him.

"You didn't have to go through the trouble of following me. You should have just asked."

Kitagawa tilted his head. "I don't like the phone. And besides, it was fun. I felt like I was a detective."

It had warmed up in the car, for the man beside him stopped shivering.

"Didn't you wait a pretty long time?"

"Dunno," Kitagawa cocked his head. "I don't have a watch. It was past three when I got on the bus, came here, and made sure your car was here..."

So he had been waiting at least two hours in this rain.

"Next time, you should just call my cell. That way, you wouldn't have to wait for hours."

"I told you I don't like the phone," Kitagawa said adamantly. Douno had no choice but to back off. The raindrops made pattering sounds against the windshield. He remembered their conversation on the phone about two weeks before. It had been raining then, too.

"How have you been doing since moving here? Have you settled down?" Douno began

with general small-talk. The silence between them was more awkward when they were sitting beside each other instead of talking over the phone.

"I dunno. It's hard to tell. Work is the same wherever I go."

"Where do you work?"

"Construction sites," Kitagawa answered. "Digging holes and carrying dirt. When it rains, work gets cancelled. A lot of the time I show up at the site to be told I'm off work today."

"I see," Douno nodded. He felt Kitagawa staring at him steadily. Unable to bear his pointed gaze, Douno averted his eyes.

"I like small spaces," Kitagawa murmured. "You're closer to me."

Douno had a foreboding feeling that Kitagawa was going to make advances on him. Kitagawa did not consider the gazes of those around him. Douno vividly recalled memories of Kitagawa as he sought Douno in their cell in the middle of the day, where other inmates were present.

Douno hastily changed gears and drove the car out. He figured Kitagawa would not try to touch him if he was driving.

"Hey, come over to my place," Kitagawa said to him as Douno drove. "Get takeout or something, and come over."

Douno had a feeling Kitagawa would force himself onto him physically if he went over to the man's house. Besides, Kitagawa was taller and physically stronger. Even if Douno refused—he had a feeling Kitagawa would go ahead and do it, anyway.

"My wife, she's probably already made dinner. She'll be waiting for me."

"Uh-huh," Kitagawa sniffed. Douno swallowed hard.

"I can't eat with you today, but maybe another day we can go out to eat together. To an *izakaya*, or something."

There was no answer. Kitagawa seemed sullen at being refused by Douno.

"So, uh, do you cook yourself? You're good with your hands, I can imagine you'd be good at anyth—"

"I don't," Kitagawa replied almost irritably.

"O-Oh. I see. Then what do you usually eat? Do you go out, or..."

"Yoshi-chan's Bento."

Douno couldn't help but turn his head.

"What's Yoshi-chan's Bento?"

"There's a takeout place near my house. They're open 'til nine. Yoshi-chan's Bento gives you a lot of food for only 290 yen."

"Do you eat there every day?" Douno asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. It's cheap. The main dishes are deep-fried, so it keeps me full longer."

"Eating ready-made food every day isn't very nutritious."

Although they had no choice of meals in prison, they were at least nutritionally-balanced, and the dishes changed every day. It seemed Kitagawa had not taken the trouble to do so for his own meals once he was out and by himself. The silence wore on, and Douno had just begun to wonder if he had made Kitagawa angry by nagging him about nutrition and such.

"What's ready-made?" Kitagawa asked.

"Food they make in the store to sell. Like bento boxes, or takeout."

"Mm-hmm," Kitagawa muttered, then slid down in his seat. It was natural enough for the man not to know certain words; although he had a middle-school education, he had barely

attended school.

Douno remembered Kitagawa saying he had been locked into a small room when he was younger, and had his meals thrown in from the window. It was unlikely he had been fed homemade dishes or nutritious meals under those circumstances. That made Kitagawa's lack of consideration for what he ate understandable.

Kei Kitagawa was a man who had been an unhappy child, betrayed and unloved by his parents. He did not know what it was like to believe in people, to love, or to receive kindness from others. He knew so pitifully little that it was heart-wrenching—wasn't that the reason why Douno wanted to do something for this man, to be involved with his life?

Douno gripped the steering wheel.

"Let's eat dinner at my house today, though it won't be anything special," he said.

The car stopped at a traffic light. When Douno looked over at the man beside him, his brow was furrowed.

"Why your house?"

"You always eat the same takeout meal, don't you? I figured it wouldn't be a bad experience for you to taste some home cooking. I won't force you, though."

Even after the car lurched into motion again, there was no answer from him. Douno drove steadfastly back to his house without bringing up another topic, and waited for the other man's response. If Kitagawa did not want to, he would say so. He was not answering because he was having trouble deciding.

Douno parked the car in the parking lot below his apartment. The rain had stopped already. Kitagawa had still not decided on whether he was going or not. With the engine still running, Douno asked him again.

"Do you want to come over?"

"What'll you do if I say I won't?" Kitagawa asked, peering up at him from beneath his eyebrows.

"I'll drive you home."

Kitagawa ran his hand through his short hair several times. He stamped his feet irritably, but did not say he wasn't coming.

"But your family is at your house," he mumbled. "Why're you trying to take me there? I waited two weeks, like I was supposed to. I was excited for today since morning, because I'd be able to eat with you in the evening, and..."

Kitagawa shook his head in frustration as he spoke. He was right: Douno realized that perhaps in Kitagawa's position, having a meal with the family of the man he loved would feel like being rubbed in the face with failure.

"I'm sorry. I'll drive you home."

Just as Douno put his hand on the parking brake, the door opened on the passenger side. Kitagawa jumped out of the car. Douno hastily shut off the ignition. He thought Kitagawa would take off and disappear, but he stood stock-still in his spot.

Douno took his bag and lunch box from the back seat.

"...Do you want to come with me?"

Kitagawa only glared at him without saying anything, and did not nod. Douno walked towards the building stairs to see what would happen. When he looked back, the man was following him. Douno climbed all the way up the stairs, then turned around again. The man was still following.

"I'm home."

When he opened the door, he was greeted with a whiff of curry.

"Welcome home," he heard Mariko's voice call from the kitchen further inside. Honoka came running down the hallway towards him, her small footsteps making pattering sounds on the floor.

"Daddy, daddy, pick me up!" His affectionate daughter thrust both her hands out. "Hurry, hurry," she rushed him, unable to wait for him to take off his shoes. Douno picked her up, and looked steadily at Kitagawa standing in the doorway.

"You've met him before, remember? This is Mr. Kitagawa, daddy's friend. Say hello." He patted Honoka on the back.

"Hullo," she mumbled in a small voice, then buried her face in Douno's shoulder shyly.

"It's a small place, but come on in."

Kitagawa slowly took off his shoes. He was barefoot and without socks.

When they entered the kitchen, today's dinner was indeed curry. It was not going to be a problem feeding an additional person.

"I've brought my friend over. Is it alright if he eats dinner with us?"

"What?" Mariko turned around in surprise.

"It's Kitagawa, the one who brought us *soba* the other day."

Kitagawa stood at the entrance to the kitchen and showed no signs of coming in. Mariko tucked her hair behind her ear, suddenly conscious of any unruly strands on her head.

"Hello," she smiled at Kitagawa. "Thank you so much for bringing us that delicious *soba* the other day." Then, she fixed Douno with a disapproving glare.

"You should have phoned me if you were bringing a friend. I would have made something more decent than curry," Mariko complained as she swiftly prepared a fourth portion.

"Need help?" Douno offered as he stood behind her. Mariko turned around.

"You gentlemen can have a chat while you wait," she said with a wink.

"We'll be able to eat soon," Douno told Kitagawa. "Do you want to wait in the living room? It's right here."

At Douno's encouragement, Kitagawa finally began to walk. With every step he took, his bare feet made pattering sounds on the floor.

They sat down across from each other on the sofa in the living room. Kitagawa kept his eyes on his feet and did not look up. He had not spoken a word since entering the house.

Honoka was sitting in Douno's lap, but appeared interested in Kitagawa, who was across from them. She threw repeated glances in his direction. She climbed down from Douno's lap and disappeared for some moments before returning with her favourite doll in her arms. She carefully crept up to the man across from her.

"This is Marin."

She thrust the doll towards Kitagawa, who had lifted his face.

"Let's play."

The child, heedless of the awkward mood between the two men, sat the doll in the silent man's lap. Douno felt like it would only make Kitagawa's mood worse.

"Honoka, come over to daddy," he called to her.

"I've never played with dolls before," Kitagawa mumbled. Honoka sat the doll down beside Kitagawa, then went back to bring out a drawing pad and pen.

"Then you can draw pictures."

Kitagawa took the pen hesitantly from her.

"Draw me a kitty-cat."

Kitagawa's brow remained furrowed in a difficult expression as his pen effortlessly sketched out a realistic-looking cat on the blank drawing pad. Honoka leaned in to peer at Kitagawa's hands as he drew.

"Kitty-cat, kitty-cat," she said happily.

Mariko called them partway through their drawing session. Apparently dinner was now ready. But even as Douno stood up, Kitagawa showed no signs of moving.

Douno knew he was being underhanded, but whispered to his daughter anyway.

"Honoka, can you lead our guest to the kitchen?"

"Yeeees," Honoka answered in a loud voice. "This way, mister," she said, taking Kitagawa's hand and leading him to the kitchen.

At the dining table, Douno and Kitagawa sat beside each other while Mariko and Honoka sat across from them.

Today's meal was curry rice and salad, typical dinner fare. Kitagawa sat staring, almost glaring, at the curry set out before him. He had never left curry uneaten in prison, so Douno was sure Kitagawa did not dislike it. Even so, he felt strangely nervous.

"I'm sorry this is all we have. I hope it'll suit your tastes. Please, feel free to have as much as you like."

Kitagawa glanced at Mariko, and seemed to incline his head a little.

"Thank you for the meal," they all said, and all three of them, excluding Kitagawa, picked their spoons up. After Douno had swallowed his first mouthful, Kitagawa finally picked up his spoon. Within five minutes, he cleared off his curry and salad.

Honoka clapped her hands in glee at the sight.

"So fast! So fast!" she said. Mariko looked astonished. Douno knew Kitagawa's fast eating were lasting effects from his life in prison, where time was limited for everything, but Mariko did not know.

"Um... would you like seconds?" she offered.

Kitagawa shook his head. Mariko glanced at Douno. He nodded shallowly, hoping she would understand that she did not have to insist.

"You're going to eat lots like Mr. Kitagawa, too, right, Honoka?" Mariko petted Honoka's head. Children her age tended to have trouble concentrating for long periods of time; she often took long to finish her meals because she would be distracted by play. But perhaps Kitagawa had influenced her today, for Honoka was eating with intense concentration.

"What kind of work do you do, Mr. Kitagawa?" Mariko asked while wiping Honoka's mouth.

"Construction," Kitagawa muttered.

"He works at construction sites," Douno jumped in, filling in the words missing from the beginning and end of Kitagawa's sentence.

"How long have you been friends with my husband? I don't think I saw you at our wedding." Douno perceived what his wife was wanting to ask, and answered ahead of Kitagawa.

"He—he was my junior in high school. I had a hard time getting in touch with him after graduation."

"I see," Mariko answered. She did not seem to doubt his explanation about Kitagawa being his underclassman. Kitagawa glanced at Douno with a questioning look, but did not try to correct

his lie.

After everyone finished dinner, they moved to the living room. Honoka clung to Kitagawa.

"Draw me pictures, draw me pictures," she begged. Mariko, who was washing the dishes in the kitchen, called Honoka back out of consideration for Kitagawa.

"Honoka, you're going to help mommy with the dishes," she said, but Honoka did not listen.

Kitagawa obeyed Honoka's requests and drew all manners of pictures on the notepad. When she said "bunny-rabbit", he drew a rabbit; when she said "Mr. Elephant", he drew an elephant. When she said "castle", he drew a towering Japanese castle with *shachihoko*⁵ ornaments, was promptly shot down with a "Noooooo" from Honoka, and was seen scratching the back of his head in confusion.

Mariko came into the living room once she finished cleaning up, and leaned down to peer at Kitagawa's pictures.

"You're very good at drawing," she said with awe. "Did you ever study art?"

The man shook his head silently. Kitagawa barely spoke to Douno or Mariko, and drew picture after picture in silence at Honoka's request. When it struck nine o'clock, both Kitagawa and Honoka yawned in tandem. Judging by Kitagawa's work cycle, Douno imagined it would almost be time for him to sleep.

"It's late. Do you want me to drive you home?" he offered.

Kitagawa put the pen and pad down on the table and stood up. Honoka, whose eyelids had been drooping sleepily as she sat beside the artist, appeared to sense him leaving.

"Draw me a whale," she said, grabbing Kitagawa's hand to stop him.

"Mr. Kitagawa has to go home now," Mariko told her.

"No, no," Honoka protested, clinging onto Kitagawa's legs.

Mariko peeled the whining girl off of Kitagawa, and Honoka burst into loud tears. Douno ushered Kitagawa to the door, the man turning back every so often as if reluctant to leave. They exited the house together.

"She's our only child, so we can't help but give in. That's why she can be a bit selfish. Sorry you had to put up with her games," Douno said to the man behind him as he went down the stairs ahead of Kitagawa. "We have to start teaching her that she can't always get what she wants."

Kitagawa was silent. He had said barely anything, so it was hard to tell what he had thought about the visit. Douno walked towards the parking lot, intending to drive Kitagawa home.

"We can just walk," Kitagawa said.

"Walk?"

"It won't even take ten minutes."

Kitagawa set off ahead of him, and Douno hastily trailed behind. They walked side-by-side through the quiet neighbourhood. A car passed them occasionally, but there were no people. There were puddles here and there, perhaps from the rain in the daytime. Douno avoided the puddles as they walked along, but Kitagawa splashed through them heedlessly.

"How was the curry?" Douno asked.

"Good," Kitagawa answered shortly.

"You should come over to eat again. I'll ask Mariko to make something more interesting

5 A fictional animal with the head of a tiger and body of a carp. Often found as protective ornaments, on the rooftops of temples and castles.

next time."

Kitagawa stopped in his tracks.

"That place is your house." His words were stiff. "I don't belong there."

Douno did not understand what he meant.

"Do you mean you feel ostracized when you're at my house?"

"What's 'ostracized'? How the hell would I know?" Kitagawa kicked his right heel into the ground in frustration. "The curry that your wife made was good. The kid was cute. But my feelings are different from that. I don't really want to see your house. It doesn't belong to me, and when I see things like that, I really... feel like you're far away. Like I'm a different-coloured balloon from everyone else."

I don't belong there. Douno felt like he could understand now what the man meant.

"Shiba told me, 'It's up to you to go over there, but don't cause trouble for Douno. If you're gonna see him, keep it once every two, three weeks.' I figured that's just how things worked, so I waited for two weeks after your phone call and went to see you. I thought about a lot of things while I was waiting. I'd bring you over to my house, and we'd eat together, and we'd talk. I had it all planned out, but now it's all ruined. I was so excited for today, and just when I finally get to see your face, you go on saying crap like you'll send me home unless I go to your house. So I either had to put up with it to be with you, or go home and wait another two weeks. It's the worst."

Kitagawa repeatedly kicked the hydro pole beside him with his heel. He kicked it over and over until, panting and out of breath, he began to shuffle his feet forward wearily. Douno was unsure whether to walk him the rest of the way home, or turn on his heel to go back. He felt like it would be awkward either way. But unable to abandon the man, Douno ran after Kitagawa.

"That's my house, and that's my family," Douno said to the man who stomped along with his back to him. "You might not have liked it, but this is reality. You can't help it if you feel like you're a different colour, because that house is where we live as a family. You can always start your own household. Then, we can have a relationship that includes both our families."

"How am I supposed to start a family?"

"Well, you find someone you love..."

"I've said over and over that I love *you*!" Kitagawa yelled, in a voice that was loud enough to ring out over the neighbourhood. Douno felt himself cower, but desperately tried to remain defiant.

"No matter how much you feel for me, I can't return your feelings. I can't feel that kind of romantic love for you. If that's what you want from me, don't ever come see me again."

Kitagawa looked seized with shock and on the brink of tears. Watching him made Douno's heart ache.

"We need to draw the line," Douno implored. "I can't feel romantic love for you, But I still want to see you as friends. If we're friends, you won't have to wait two or three weeks. Come over every day, if you like. Come over to eat with us."

Kitagawa hung his head. His clenched fists were trembling.

"I've been thinking for a long time: you're not fair. I like you so many times more than you like me. I know I do."

"Love isn't about comparing the weight of each other's feelings."

Their eyes met.

"I wanted to live my life with Mariko, not you."

After a long silence, Kitagawa spoke. "So I'm the loser," he mumbled.

"Don't say it like that. It's true that I married Mariko, but I still want to keep being friends with you. I want to see what kind of person you'll fall in love and find happiness with. I still want to be involved in your life."

Kitagawa turned on his heel and started walking again. In the outskirts of the residential area, he turned off on a path, and went all the way to the end. His feet stopped in front of a single detached house.

It was surrounded by high walls, and the branches of a tall tree were poking out over it. Douno had seen this house before; the real estate agent had shown it to him and his wife when they were looking for a house to live in together. It was old and dirty, and since Mariko protested, they had not taken it. Kitagawa put a hand on the gate, which swung limply like a mere ornament.

"I'm going home now," Douno said.

Kitagawa's back was to him. He did not answer, nor did he show signs of going into his house.

"I don't want to be too late, so I'm going home," Douno said again.

There was no response.

"Feel free to give me a call whenever you like. Let's eat together. You don't need to hold back." Douno insisted as strongly as he could at the man's back, and turned to go home.

"Hey."

A voice called him.

"Give me your phone number."

Douno realized he had not given the man his phone number yet. He fished out his cell phone from his jacket pocket, and displayed his number. He repeated the eleven-digit number twice, slowly.

"Can you remember it?" Douno looked up at the man searchingly.

"You still tell me to call you even when I've told you I don't want to, huh?"

Douno remembered Kitagawa mentioning over and over that he hated the phone, in the parking lot of his workplace.

"Oh, sorry. But you'll be able to get a hold of me better by phone, and we wouldn't miss each other when we try to meet." He made a little bit of an excuse for his forgetfulness.

"And don't hang up on me when we're on the phone."

Douno tilted his head.

"You hung up all of a sudden the other day, and it pissed me off."

"Oh, right. Okay."

Douno had called to thank Kitagawa for the *soba*, and had hung up on him from the unbearable weight of their conversation. He had no idea it had bothered Kitagawa so much.

"I remember everything I talked about with you today. I never forget what you say. But you forget what I say right away," Kitagawa said in a detached way. "Is that what it means for me to love you and for you to see me as a friend?"

Douno felt like he was being blamed. Even though Kitagawa might not have meant it, it still came across to him that way.

"I'm going home now."

"...I'm lonely." Kitagawa looked at Douno with a pleading gaze. "I'm lonely."

Douno looked at his feet. "Let's meet again tomorrow. Once the new day comes, you can come over again."

"If I stay home alone, I probably won't be able to stand it. Like that time with you over the

phone, but I'll feel worse, and tears'll start coming out of my eyes."

"You only have to wait a little bit until morning." Douno repeated as if convincing a small child. He made sure nothing more spilled from Kitagawa's lips after his plaintive claim of loneliness, then turned on his heel. He walked a few steps and turned around. He could see the shadow still standing in the same spot.

Douno did not turn around again until he got home. If he turned around and found the man still watching him, Douno felt like he would have run back, against his better judgement.

Kitagawa had said over and over that he was lonely. *If he's that lonely, it wouldn't hurt if I stayed with him for one night*—Douno's feelings were starting to tip in that direction. It was affection, he thought. It was not romantic love, and they were not family. But he harboured an affection inside him which he could do nothing about.

Douno came home with heavy spirits, as if dragged down by Kitagawa's loneliness. He heard Mariko talking to someone, but as soon as Douno appeared in the living room, the phone was hung up.

"Who were you talking to?"

"Mr. Taguchi," Mariko said. Taguchi was the manager of the supermarket where Mariko worked part-time. She had introduced them once when Douno went shopping with her. Taguchi was three years older than Douno, but he looked much younger and was an amiable man. He seemed to like children, for he was all smiles when he spoke to Honoka, and had given her a candy from the store as a gift. He was married for over ten years. "They don't have children, though," Mariko had said.

"The person who works the night shift is in the hospital from an injury, and had to take emergency leave. He asked me if I could fill in starting tomorrow, but I have a child to take care of, so..."

"I guess you're right. If my work day ended earlier, I could've watched Honoka, but..."

"Thanks, but it's okay. I already told him no." Mariko smiled. Come to think of it, Honoka was nowhere in sight, when she had been bawling moments before.

"Did Honoka go to sleep?"

"She cried herself to sleep. I think she really enjoyed Mr. Kitagawa playing with her and drawing pictures for her." Mariko hunched her shoulders.

"I see," Douno let out a murmur which sounded more like a sigh.

"He's a little different, isn't he?" Mariko said. "He doesn't talk much. But he's really kind. He had a lot of patience to put up with a four-year-old child for that long."

Douno was happy to hear her call Kitagawa kind. He cared about the man, and he felt like Mariko was also on the same page.

"He's living by himself, and I don't think he eats very well. He's not close with his family, either, so I want him to feel at home spending time with us. Is it alright if I invite him over for dinner in the future?"

"Go ahead, but promise you'll let me know beforehand." Mariko gave Douno's chest a gentle prod.

"I will," Douno answered, and gently embraced his wife. As he stroked her soft brown hair which cascaded midway down her back, he noticed something twinkling around his wife's slender, fair neck. It was a necklace, but he had never seen this design before.

"Did you buy this?" he asked, plucking the chain with his fingertips. Mariko's spine flinched.

"I'm sorry I didn't talk to you about it beforehand. But it was so cute, and it didn't cost much."

Douno smiled wryly. "I'm not angry at you. You have a part-time job, too, so you should feel free to buy what you want without my permission."

"Thank you," Mariko murmured. She buried her face in Douno's chest, and circled her arms around his back.

"Say, is Mr. Kitagawa dating anyone?" she asked.

"I don't think so. Why?"

"He's kind of good-looking, don't you think?"

"Is he?"

"Yeah," said Mariko. "He's tall, and though he's a bit awkward, he's kind. I think he'd be on my radar if I were single."

"I don't like the sound of that," Douno murmured uncertainly.

"I'm kidding," Mariko giggled softly.

"But I do hope Kitagawa finds someone special like that," Douno said. "Then he wouldn't have to feel lonely."

"You're a kind one, too," Mariko said, touching Douno's fingers. Douno gently clasped her thin fingers in his own, and wished earnestly that such a someone would really appear before Kitagawa.

Overtime wore on late that day, and by the time Douno left the office, it was past nine at night. An accident had happened along the route home, closing off an entire lane and bringing traffic to a standstill. Douno did not get to his apartment until past ten.

The asphalt in the parking lot still carried a damp smell from the heat wave during the day. Exhausted, Douno climbed the stairs with a drooping head, and when he opened the door to his apartment, the first thing he saw was a familiar pair of shoes. Dirty white runners—Kitagawa was here.

"I'm home," Douno called as he entered the kitchen. Mariko was there preparing Douno's portion of dinner. He peered into the living room beyond to see Kitagawa asleep, lying on his back on the sofa. Curled up like a cat on his chest was Honoka.

"I wonder if he finds that heavy?" Douno whispered to Mariko as he loosened his tie. Mariko smiled wryly.

"Honoka was practically jumping up and down when Mr. Kitagawa came over. She wouldn't leave him for a moment. At around nine, I think, he tried to go home, but Honoka had a crying fit, and he's been keeping her company since. I guess they must have tired themselves out. They're both fast asleep."

Douno sat at the table with his bowl in one hand, gazing at them absently. From a stranger's eyes, the two looked like a real father and daughter.

It was now about two months since Kitagawa first came to Douno's house for dinner. After his first visit, Kitagawa began to come over at least once or twice a week to eat dinner.

At first, Kitagawa would telephone Douno, and would wait at the bottom floor of Douno's apartment until Douno arrived home, at which point they would go up to his apartment together.

Kitagawa was as taciturn as ever in Mariko's presence, and hardly spoke. When he did talk, it was during the seven-to-eight-minute walk with Douno back to Kitagawa's house, and even

then, he only spoke a few words at best.

Kitagawa still talked to him, but no longer mentioned anything about loving him or feeling lonely. Douno reckoned it was because Kitagawa had been able to draw the line in his heart.

Eventually, Kitagawa appeared to grow more comfortable with Douno's family, for he began to come over for dinner even when Douno was not home. It started first when Kitagawa had stopped by on his way home from work with sweets for Honoka, saying he had gotten them as a gift. Since it was conveniently dinner hour, Mariko had invited him over.

"My husband's not home yet, but would you like to stay for dinner with us anyway?" she had offered. Kitagawa did not decline. By the time Douno got home, Kitagawa had already eaten and left.

Douno was surprised to hear the story from Mariko. He could not believe that Kitagawa had visited and stayed for dinner without him present. Douno took that as a sign that Kitagawa was beginning to feel at ease at his house, and it filled him with happiness.

After that, Kitagawa began to bring over all sorts of things, claiming they were from his workplace. According to him, when they worked with non-commercial clients who had custom home projects, they often visited the construction site and brought fruits, snacks, and juice for the workers. Kitagawa would bring what was left.

Douno once told him not to feel pressured to bring things. Kitagawa dismissed it, saying they were only leftovers anyway.

"Mr. Kitagawa brought watermelon today," Mariko informed him. "We had some already, and it was very sweet and delicious." She lowered her voice a level as she sat across from Douno.

"Mr. Kitagawa is such an enigma. He was a little scary at first, but once you get to know him, he's not like that all. Today, he even offered to wash the dishes because he said I'm always the one cooking for everyone."

"Kitagawa did the dishes?"

"Yes. You could learn from him, too, hubby."

"Oh, no," Douno murmured jokingly. Mariko giggled.

"But he's like a big kid."

"Kid?"

"He takes playing with Honoka so seriously. I feel like he's more of Honoka's boyfriend than your friend. Is it rude to think of a grown man like that?"

Douno had nothing to say in answer.

"You should have seen him earlier," Mariko continued. "It was so funny. Honoka was proposing to Mr. Kitagawa. She said 'Will you marry me?' and everything. You know how kids just say those things. Mr. Kitagawa should have just brushed it off, but he was actually giving her serious answers. 'But we're thirty-one years apart' he'd say, or 'You'll feel different about me once you're older'. I thought I would split my sides laughing. I could barely hold it in."

Douno laughed, too, as the image rose in his mind. It was past ten-thirty when he finished eating. Douno gathered Honoka in his arms and lifted her off of Kitagawa's chest. The movement woke Kitagawa up. He looked at Douno with sleepy eyes.

"I heard you were keeping Honoka company until now. I'm sorry for keeping you so late," Douno said.

The man's lips, twisted in a half-tearful frown and a half-smile, moved slightly to speak.

"Doesn't matter."

"I had some of that watermelon, too. It was delicious."

Kitagawa got up on the sofa and gave his head a vigorous shake.

"I'll take you home."

Douno left Honoka in Mariko's care and left the apartment with a sleepy-eyed Kitagawa. There was really no need to walk Kitagawa home since he was a man, but after doing so the first time, it was a custom for Douno to take Kitagawa home after he ate.

"I want to take the car today," Kitagawa said, which was unusual for him. They normally walked, but Douno was grateful for the man's request to take the car. He was a little tired from working overtime today.

Kitagawa yawned incessantly in the passenger seat. He wearily rubbed his eyes over and over. Douno asked him what time he usually slept, and to no surprise, the man answered that he slept at nine.

The seven- or eight-minute walk to Kitagawa's house took only two or three minutes by car.

"Your wife was saying she wants a second kid," Kitagawa said, just as Douno parked the car in front of the man's house.

"What?"

"A second kid."

It was true that Mariko had mentioned wanting to have a second child. But he had no idea why Kitagawa was telling him this.

"We're already on a tight budget, so I think a second child would be hard to have," Douno sighed.

"Mm-hmm," Kitagawa murmured before closing his eyes. "Let me know when you feel like having another one."

"Wh-Why?"

"So I can die."

"Die, as in..." Douno hesitantly asked the obvious. Kitagawa gave him a sidelong glance.

"Stop living," he answered.⁶

"Why would you want to die if I have a second child?"

Kitagawa scratched his head.

"If I die, I might be reincarnated as your kid."

"As if that could ever happen!" Douno found himself yelling angrily.

"But it might, right? It said so in a book I read yesterday. This kid died and was born again to the same couple. That's can't be *all* a lie, is it? Why would you say it's impossible?" Kitagawa's face was serious.

"But that means you'll die, right?"

"Well, yeah."

"There's no point if you're not alive anymore."

"Yeah, but," Kitagawa insisted, "I'd rather be a kid in your family instead of going on living as me. That way I'll be able to live with you forever."

Kitagawa let out a short sigh.

"Your house has this warm feeling. I like how it smells inside, too. But every day when the time comes, I have to go home. Your house is somewhere I'm allowed to go over to play, but not stay at forever, right?"

6 Changed slightly. In the original Japanese, Douno asks, "Who dies?" and Kitagawa answers, "Me", which would make no sense in English.

Douno pounded the steering wheel.

"I didn't invite you to my house to push you to extremes and make you talk about dying. I just wanted you to experience what a home was like—"

Kitagawa fell silent.

"What can I do to make my love disappear?" he asked quietly. "I'm starting to get tired of it. I'm sick of thinking about you all day. Should I go somewhere far away where I can't see your face? But I know where your house is, so I'll probably end up coming back whenever I want to see you. Oh, I know, I just have to get thrown in jail again. In there, I'd—"

"Stop it!" Douno cut him off desperately. "Don't mistreat yourself like that, talking about dying and getting yourself into jail."

Kitagawa let out a long sigh.

"I never mattered much in the first place. It doesn't matter if I live or die. You're the only one who tries to attach some weird meaning to me. That's why I can't help thinking about you, too."

Kitagawa got out of the car. Douno scrambled out of the driver's seat as well.

"Don't do anything rash, you hear?" he yelled at the man's back as he made his way to the gates.

The man passed through the gates without turning around. Douno felt crushed as he climbed back into the car. *"I'll die so I can be reincarnated into your family."* Douno's heart trembled with grief at the way Kitagawa thought.

Kitagawa was far from insignificant and hopeless. His existence had meaning in itself. *Why else would I involve myself this much in your life?* It was because Kitagawa had his own charms, and for no other reason than that.

Was being ill-treated in childhood enough to make a man despair this much? Enough to make him want to die?

Someone—won't someone please love this man? Douno wished in earnest. *Won't someone love him so much and bind him from head to toe in love and responsibility, so much that he would never be able to mention his own death again?*

In the end of August, Mariko quit her part-time job. It was a sudden decision, and when Douno asked why in case anything had happened, Mariko only stared at her feet and said she didn't get along with the people at work. She said nothing more, and since she appeared reluctant to talk about it, Douno let the topic drop without pursuing it further.

In the first week of September one Friday night at ten, the phone rang. When Douno picked up, a man's voice spoke on the other end.

"Hello, this is Taguchi from Sun Supermarket speaking. May I speak to Mrs. Mariko?"

Douno wondered what an ex-boss might want with her, but passed the phone over anyway. Less than a minute passed before Mariko angrily slammed the phone down.

"What did Mr. Taguchi want?" Douno asked.

"I don't know," Mariko said angrily. It was rare for her to get so emotional.

"What do you mean, you don't know? Didn't he call you to talk to you about something?"

Mariko sat down across from him. She knitted her brow in a frown, and sighed several times. She glanced at Douno briefly.

"He comes to me for advice about his wife."

"His wife?"

"She hasn't been well this past year. I think she's entering menopause. She's always in a bad mood, and she takes it out on him. He's been talking to me about it before, but I can't believe he's still calling me to complain even after I've quit. It's not even my problem."

Douno stood up, went to sit down beside Mariko, and put his arm around her shoulders.

"Don't say things like that. If he's going to feel better by you hearing him out, just let him talk until he feels better."

"But—" Mariko still looked furious. "I hate his wife. She used to be a model, and she likes to show off about it. She's tall and pretty, but she talks down to everyone."

Douno kissed Mariko, unable to stand listening to his wife badmouth someone in this way. When he stroked her hair gently, the younger woman apologized.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know you hate these kinds of conversations. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You need to vent, too."

"You know," Mariko lowered her eyes. "When I met you, I remember thinking what a gentle person you were. I knew for sure I'd be happy with you."

"Are you happy?" Douno asked. Mariko nodded deeply and put her arms around him. Douno began to feel aroused for the first time in a while. His fingertips had just begun to gather heat when the phone rang again.

Douno made to pick it up, but Mariko stood first.

"I think it's for me," she said. She answered not from the main phone, but the cordless handset in the kitchen. She said two or three words into the phone before she pressed a hand against the mouthpiece and turned to Douno.

"It's a friend from high school," she told him, then left the living room.

Douno was a little disappointed at being interrupted in the moment. He felt like having a beer for a change, and opened the fridge. He was sitting and watching the news, sipping his beer, when Mariko returned to the living room twenty minutes later.

"My friend invited me to dinner the day after tomorrow. I told her I can't because I have to take care of Honoka."

She sat down beside Douno. "Let me have some of that," she said, and took a swallow of his opened beer, and sighed. She had quit her job due to social problems in the workplace, yet here was her former boss continuing to come to her for advice. Douno felt like she deserved at least a day off to have dinner with her friend, chat, and enjoy some freedom.

"Why don't you go have that dinner with your friend?" Douno suggested. "I can watch Honoka for a day, no problem."

"But—"

"Go on and enjoy your time out."

Mariko appeared to hesitate a little.

"Thank you," she mumbled with her face down.

On the day of Mariko's dinner, Douno talked to his boss Tatsuta immediately after arriving at work.

"My wife won't be home in the evening today, so I'm wondering if I could go home early to take care of my daughter," he asked. Tatsuta was quick to give a positive answer, since it was not a busy time of year.

"Sure, that's fine. I understand," he reassured Douno.

The morning went by as usual, but things changed quickly in the afternoon when a part-

time worker fell ill suddenly. She had been fine in the morning, so her sickness was likely due to the lunch she had brought. She was suffering from severe and persistent diarrhoea and vomiting, and was too weak to walk. Tatsuta took her to a hospital nearby, then sent her straight home.

Douno had to take on the part-timer's share of the workload as well as Tatsuta's portion, which he had dropped to accompany the girl. Suddenly, he was not sure if he could get home by six o'clock as he had planned.

Upon Tatsuta's return, they split the bills and began sorting through them together, but even when five o'clock rolled around, they were not even through two-thirds of the work. Douno could not bring himself to go home early and thrust the rest of the work upon Tatsuta. He agonized about what to do. He felt guilty about calling his wife and telling her that he wasn't able to come home after all. She was probably eagerly looking forward to going out to eat with her friend. He knew Mariko would understand and call off her plans if he explained his situation. She was not a child, after all. Yet—

Time ticked away as precisely as ever no matter how many times Douno looked at the clock. Amidst his distracted mind and the resulting frequent interruptions to his work, Douno's ears caught the sound of rain. Great. Now it was raining, to top things off. It did not get worse than this. Rain... rain....

"When it rains—"

Suddenly he remembered. If the man was off work.... Once Douno got the idea of asking him, there was no second-guessing. With a word of apology to Tatsuta, he excused himself and went out into the hallway with his cell phone in hand, and made a hasty call to the man who lived in the single detached house on the outskirts of the residential neighbourhood.

Douno got home past ten o'clock at night. With a packaged meal from the convenience store in one hand, he opened the door to his apartment and was met suddenly with a burst of joyous laughter.

He peered into the living room to see Honoka sitting on Kitagawa's crossed legs, reading a picture book in a loud voice. Her favourite picture books lay scattered in a circle around the two.

"I'm home."

Kitagawa turned around slowly. He gathered Honoka up, who was still reading, and came walking over to the kitchen.

"Me and Honoka already ate the dinner your wife made."

"Oh, that's fine. I bought my own." Douno placed the bag containing his takeout dinner on the table.

"I'm sorry for asking you to babysit all of a sudden."

"I was off work anyway. I had nothing to do, so I gave her a bath."

"Huh?"

Douno looked at Honoka and noticed she was wearing her yellow pyjamas instead of her regular clothes. He had not noticed until now.

"I took a bath, too, while I was at it."

"Oh... well, that's totally fine. That saves me a lot of work." Kitagawa grinned proudly when Douno thanked him. Douno had called his house in the evening. He had figured Kitagawa would be off early from work because of the rain, and he was right. The man had been home.

When Douno asked him to babysit Honoka while his wife was out, the man had agreed in

an emotionless voice.

"Thank you so much for today. You're a lifesaver," Douno thanked Kitagawa properly.

"Your wife went out to eat or something, right?"

"Yeah. I wanted her to have a night out with a friend for a change. I'm sure she gets tired from looking after Honoka and me every day."

"Mm-hmm, I see," Kitagawa murmured.

"Daddy, daddy, guess what?"

"What?"

"Me and Kei are gonna get married," Honoka announced happily, with her arms wrapped around Kitagawa's neck. Honoka's marriage announcements had become somewhat of a regular occurrence.

"Is that so? Then, you're going to become a proper little lady fit for Kitagawa, won't you?"

"Yeah!" Honoka nodded deeply once. While Douno ate, Honoka set Kitagawa to work at his best skill: drawing. Noticing the sudden silence, Douno peeked into the living room to see Honoka fallen fast asleep in Kitagawa's arms.

He looked at the clock. It was almost eleven. Mariko was not home yet. Perhaps she was getting carried away in nostalgic conversations with her high school friend.

"Your wife's pretty late," Kitagawa muttered.

"Yeah," Douno agreed vaguely. "Oh, you must be sleepy, too. I'm sorry for keeping you so late. I'll take you home."

Kitagawa shifted Honoka over in his arms.

"What should I do with her?"

"I'm sure she'll be fine alone because she's sleeping, but I'll take her in case. We'll take the car tonight. It's raining, anyway, and you won't get wet this way."

"Mm-hmm," Kitagawa answered. Douno wondered if the man wanted to walk home, but he could not yield today since Honoka was with them.

"So, what about my thanks?"

"Huh?" Douno asked in surprise.

"My thanks. My thank-you. I watched your kid for you. I think I deserve something in return, right?"

Douno felt flustered. He had not expected to be asked for a token of gratitude for a four-hour babysitting session. He had simply seen it as Kitagawa coming over for dinner and staying longer than usual.

We invited you over for dinner so many times until now. With some effort, Douno restrained himself from sounding like he was the one doing Kitagawa a favour. Douno had been the one to call Kitagawa out suddenly, and it was true that the man had been a great help. But it seemed much too cold and impersonal to give him cash.

"Is there something you want? I'll buy it for the next time you come."

"I don't need things. I want a promise."

"A promise?"

Kitagawa gathered a limp Honoka up in his arms. Honoka was nudged awake by the motion, and Kitagawa rubbed his cheek against hers like a dog.

"When this one turns sixteen, I want you to give her to me."

Douno blinked in astonishment.

"That is, if she still likes me when she's sixteen."

Douno's brain could not sort out the sudden statement.

"Y-Yeah, but—" he managed to stammer despite his stubbornly leaden tongue. "Honoka is only four. She's just a little child. She says she wants to marry you, but she's just gotten into a habit of saying that. It's not something to take seriously—"

Kitagawa stroked Honoka's hair.

"It doesn't matter if it's a kid or an adult, they still feel the same love. —Honoka, do you like me?"

"I loooooove you!" Honoka clung to Kitagawa's neck. The man's eyes crinkled in a smile.

"When you turn sixteen and you still like me the same, I'll take you as my wife," he murmured to the child with genuine sincerity, then looked at Douno.

"Promise," he said.

Saying yes was the last thing Douno wanted to do.

"But really, Honoka is just a child..."

"I'm not saying I want her now. I'm talking about when she turns sixteen. She won't be a child anymore when she's sixteen."

"There's Honoka's own feelings as well..."

"I'm only saying if she still likes me then. I won't force her if she doesn't want to."

Kitagawa was not kidding. When Honoka turned sixteen, and she said she loved him, he would probably really take her away.

"B-But you're too far apart in age." Douno's palms turned sweaty as he spoke. Kitagawa tilted his head in perplexity.

"Why are you so against it? You don't wanna give your daughter away to an older ex-convict?" His voice rang out over Douno's bowed head.

"That's not what I mean."

It did not matter if the man was an ex-convict, or someone far apart in age. If Honoka said she really loved him, Douno knew he would have no choice but to acknowledge him. But he had trouble coming to terms with the fact that "him" was Kitagawa. Was the man saying this because he really loved Honoka, or did he want her because she was Douno's daughter? Douno could not help but feel Kitagawa was taking his daughter as a replacement for him. He felt himself shudder.

"You should have more kids," Kitagawa said suddenly.

Douno raised his head.

"Two, three, more, it doesn't matter. Make enough so you wouldn't mind giving one to me."

"That's absurd!" Douno snapped. "I don't raise kids to give them away to you!"

Kitagawa furrowed his brow.

"What're you so mad about? You started this in the first place. You told me to love someone and start a family. I think this kid is cute. So if I'm gonna start a family, I'll start it with Honoka."

"She's a little girl! Will you listen to yourself?" Douno yelled, wrenching Honoka away from Kitagawa.

"Noooo, I wan' Kei to hold me!" Honoka whined, resisting her father's embrace. She thrashed and flailed, and when Douno unwittingly let go, she went dashing back to Kitagawa. She clung to him desperately. Kitagawa bent his knees so he was level with Honoka, and gently stroked her straight hair.

"If you wanna be my bride, grow up soon," he told her. "But don't become pretty. It'll be a pain in the neck if other guys started coming up to you."

They heard a clatter at the door.

"I'm home," called a voice brightly. Mariko came into the kitchen. "I'm sorry, honey," she apologized. "My friend and I got carried away with our conversation. Mr. Kitagawa, you too. I'm sorry making you babysit on such short notice today."

"Doesn't matter," Kitagawa answered in his usual brusque manner.

"I bought some cake on the way home. Why don't we all sit down and have some?"

"Kitagawa's going home now," Douno answered before Kitagawa could.

"Really?" Mariko said, tilting her head and looking disappointed. Kitagawa gave Honoka a playful rub on the head before heading to the doorway. Douno watched as the man put his shoes on. Since he did not mean to take him home, he purposely did not put on his own shoes.

Kitagawa finished putting on his shoes and stood in the doorway as if to wait for him.

"Walk yourself home today."

Kitagawa cocked his head slightly, but said nothing. He exited the apartment by himself. When Douno returned to the living room, Mariko was talking on the phone with someone. She hung up immediately when she noticed Douno come in.

"I thought you were taking Mr. Kitagawa home."

"Not today."

"Why not?"

Mariko glanced out the window. "It's raining pretty hard out there. I hope Mr. Kitagawa doesn't get soaked on his way home."

Douno approached the window. She was right—it was pouring outside, as if to wash something away. He spotted a black umbrella slowly walking down the pathway in front of the apartment. It stopped, then appeared to look up. Douno could not see the face very well, but he felt like it was Kitagawa. He quickly yanked the curtain shut.

Honoka was so preoccupied with the cake that Mariko had bought that she did not throw a tantrum when Kitagawa had to go home. Douno sank into his thoughts as he watched his daughter devour the cake with cream all over her mouth. One thing was for certain: Kitagawa's asking for his four-year-old's hand in marriage was not normal.

But in a decade and some years, Honoka would grow from a child to a woman. If Kitagawa asked for Honoka's hand then, Douno felt like he wouldn't be able to say no—even more so if they were serious about each other.

"Do you not like the cake much?" Mariko asked him, looking concerned that his portion was untouched.

"That's not it," Douno replied, then stood up. "I'm not in the mood for sweet stuff right now. I'll have it tomorrow."

As Douno moved behind his wife, whose head was down. He spotted a red mark on her neck. He tilted his head curiously, wondering if he had kissed that spot when they had sex two days ago. When he touched the reddened spot, Mariko's spine tensed.

"Honey, stop that. Your hands are cold." Douno hastily withdrew his hand.

"Sorry. It was getting red there."

Mariko scratched her neck lightly with her pretty pink manicured nails.

"Is it a bug bite? It's been itching since yesterday."

"You shouldn't scratch it," Douno whispered into her ear, then embraced Mariko from behind. She smelled newly-washed, fresh and clean like soap. Douno did not recognize this perfume.

"Hey..."

Mariko turned around. Her expression was stiff, for some inexplicable reason.

"What kind of man do you think Honoka will marry in the future?"

Mariko gave a pronounced blink before bursting into laughter.

"Are you worrying about that already? Honoka's only four. You're quite the handful, aren't you, Mr. Papa?"

"Children grow up quickly. That's why I was just wondering..."

Hmm, Mariko murmured as she placed both hands on Douno's arms circling around her.

"I don't know what sort of person she'll love, but I do hope she'll be happy. I want her to find a gentle husband, just like I did."

Douno watched his daughter intently eating the cake. He thought, fleetingly, about how he would feel if Kitagawa bore Honoka away when she turned sixteen.

"When this one turns sixteen, I want you to give her to me."

Even after angering Douno with this statement, Kitagawa's visits to the Douno house did not cease. He continued to come over to eat dinner at a pace of once to twice a week.

Although Honoka continued to say she wanted to be Kitagawa's bride, Kitagawa himself stopped saying he wanted Honoka as a wife ever since that day Douno had asked him to babysit. But Douno felt like the man was still serious about what he said, and had merely stopped putting it into words.

Douno reflected on what he did that rainy day and admitted he had acted immaturely. Kitagawa had not suggested taking her against her will, and he had said he would prioritize Honoka's feelings. Even if Kitagawa was serious, this promise would be null if Honoka had no interest in him. In retrospect, Douno felt like he could have said yes—it was only an informal promise, after all.

Lately, Kitagawa had begun to visit Douno's house on Sunday afternoons. He came not to eat, but to play with Honoka. Honoka knew Kitagawa came over on Sundays, so she was often restless since morning. When Kitagawa arrived, she was beside herself with joy and would cling to Kitagawa like a suckerfish, saying, "Let's play outside" or "Draw me something."

Douno sometimes had to work on Sundays, and occasionally he would come home past two to find the house empty, with Kitagawa and Honoka gone to the park and Mariko gone shopping.

Sometimes Douno had the impression that Honoka was closer to Kitagawa than she was to her own father. He sometimes accompanied Honoka and Kitagawa to the park on Sunday afternoons, but there was no way he could put up with child's play patiently for hours on end like Kitagawa did.

Then came October, and its first Sunday. Douno left the house for work in the afternoon, then came back past five to find a rare sight—flowers in the vase in the living room. They were small purple flowers, the kind he would probably have seen in the back mountains in his childhood. The flowers made him feel strongly nostalgic.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Honoka brought them home," Mariko answered.

"Who did she get them from? Don't tell me she's picked them from someone else's garden."

"Of course not, Mr. Kitagawa was with her," Mariko said with a laugh. As Douno touched the purple petals, he heard the pattering footsteps of Honoka running up to him. She pulled at

Douno's pant leg with her tiny fingers. She cupped her mouth as if about to tell a secret, and when Douno crouched down, Honoka put her cupped hands to his ear and spoke in a low voice.

"I got the flowers from Kei's house."

"Kitagawa's house?"

"There's lots in his garden."

Douno looked at her and saw sitting atop her head a small crown of flowers about ten centimetres wide, made with the same purple flowers. He picked it up to take a closer look, and saw that several threads connected the small flower stems together to make a ring. It was quite a piece of handiwork.

"Daddy, it's mine." His daughter stretched her hands out and stood on her tip-toes. When Douno set the crown on her head, Honoka giggled with glee.

Kitagawa's house—the old rental property with a yard. When the real estate agent had shown it to him, the garden had been dark and overgrown with weeds.

"Mr. Kitagawa's your Prince Charming, isn't he?" Mariko pinched her daughter's cheek lightly.

"I'm Kei's fee-an-say," Honoka pouted, having apparently picked up the mature word from somewhere. "Next, he's gonna make me a crown with yellow flowers. He promised."

Every time Honoka squeezed her crown of flowers, the purple petals loosened and scattered to the floor. Douno watched those petals fall, feeling somewhat conflicted.

On the next Sunday, in the afternoon, Douno went to work on his day off. A female part-timer had quit suddenly, and they were having trouble finding a replacement. A week's worth of menial tasks had piled up over that time, and Douno was heading in to get those done.

At past five thirty, Douno began to clean up his desk with a mind to get home soon. Just then, his cell phone rang in his bag. It was from Mariko.

"Honoka's missing," she said, her voice trembling a little. "After we ate lunch, I nodded off for a bit on the couch. I woke up past two, and Honoka was gone. She was watching a video right beside me. The front door was open, and... I thought at first Mr. Kitagawa had come by and taken Honoka out, but it's past five and I haven't heard anything from him. He usually brings her home around this time."

Douno tilted his head.

"Maybe Honoka's still dragging Kitagawa around. Have you tried calling his house?"

"I have, but no one's picking up. I don't think anyone's home. Besides, Mr. Kitagawa always says something to me before taking Honoka out. Sure, he might have come while I was sleeping, and Honoka might have unlocked the door, realizing it was him, and they might've gone out to play together. But isn't it a bit careless to leave the door unlocked? I think there's something wrong."

Douno tried to calm his wife, who insisted that something was off.

"Have you tried looking for her in the park?"

"I went once, but she wasn't there. I couldn't bear leaving the house, just in case Honoka came home."

"I'll head back right away," Douno told her, and hung up his cell. He did not take Honoka's disappearance very seriously at the time. It was only five-thirty, and he figured she was likely over at Kitagawa's house.

Douno stopped by Kitagawa's house on his way home. He phoned the man once, but no one picked up. He parked his car in an abandoned lot close to Kitagawa's house, and pushed the limp ornamental gates open to enter the property.

There was a concrete path about five metres long from the gates to the door. The sun had begun to set, and it was growing dark. The garden was dense with tall, overgrown plants. Douno felt like he could easily overlook a small child hidden curled up in the shadows at his feet.

There was no doorbell at the entrance, but there was a palm-sized plank of wood with "Kitagawa" written on it, serving as a nameplate.

Douno knocked the sliding door a few times. There was no response. On a whim, he pulled the door sideways, and it slid open easily without a sound. It was not locked. Kitagawa was astonishingly careless.

It was dark in the doorway, but Douno could make out Kitagawa's white running shoes. Honoka's small shoes were nowhere to be seen.

"Kitagawa, are you home?" he called loudly. He heard the floorboards creaking further down the hallway. The light in the entrance turned on with a click.

"It's you." Kitagawa was naked from the waist up, with pyjama bottoms. He narrowed his eyes in a disgruntled manner. "What do you want?"

"Did you come over today?"

Kitagawa scratched his head.

"What time is it right now?"

Douno checked his watch. "Ten past six," he answered. Kitagawa clicked his tongue irritably.

"I was drinking 'til morning with the guys from the construction site. I came home and was sleeping 'til now. I haven't gone to your house."

Only then did Douno realize his wife's misgivings were coming true. He swallowed hard.

"Honoka's been missing since about two this afternoon. I was totally under the impression that you were with her."

Kitagawa put on a pair of bamboo *setta* sandals and slipped past Douno to go out into the yard.

"Hey, Honoka. Come out if you're there."

Kitagawa walked around the dense and jungle-like garden while calling Honoka's name. Douno joined him. They even checked under the elevated porch, but Douno's little daughter was nowhere to be found.

Douno panicked. He had supposed all long that he would find Honoka at Kitagawa's house. If she had gone out alone and gotten lost, there was still hope. But if she had, by chance, been kidnapped—Douno was unable to keep still at the thought.

"If she's not here, that's fine. I'll go home and try searching around there."

Douno made to go home, and was grabbed firmly by the shoulder from behind.

"If you're gonna look for her, I'll help."

"Yeah, but..."

"Isn't it better to have as many hands as you can for these things?"

Kitagawa was right. Two was better than one; three was better than two, for they could split up to look for her.

"I'm worried about the kid, too. Once I get changed, I'll look for her on the way to your house."

“Th-Thank you.”

Kitagawa went back into his house. Douno hurried to his car outside, and drove it home while keeping a cautious eye out in case his daughter was squatting curled up on the sidewalk.

It was 6:45 by the time Douno got home, and Honoka had still not returned. When Douno told Mariko that she had not been at Kitagawa's house either, Mariko paled and sank weakly to her knees at the door.

“Kitagawa's out there searching for her, too. I'm thinking of going to the park and the main road again. I want you to stay home and keep watch.”

Before leaving the house, Douno reassured Mariko that Honoka would definitely be found, and that she had to remain strong.

However, in the end, Douno could not find Honoka around the park or along the main road. He tried going to Honoka's kindergarten, but the gates were shut tightly on weekends, and there were no small gaps that a child might fit through.

The clock struck nine as Douno frantically searched the vicinity of his house. He called Mariko to let her know he was coming home before heading back to the apartment.

Mariko was sitting on the floor in the doorway clutching her cell phone. When Douno entered the apartment, she looked up at him, close to tears.

“So Honoka hasn't been found yet?”

“I'm going to go out again and look for her.”

“Honey, why don't we go to the police about this?”

Douno turned around.

“The police are the specialists when it comes to finding lost children, right? I'm sure if we tell them how she disappeared, they'll give us tips on how to find her, or some advice.”

The police—Douno recalled his bitter past with the police when he was framed as a train groper. He was still overcome with anger as he remembered the interrogation. It had been as if they were trying to make him out as the perpetrator.

He had a lingering aversion to the police, but now was not the time to be trapped by his past; there was a chance he would end up regretting putting his ego first. Douno followed his wife's advice and called the police. When he told them that his daughter had been missing since this afternoon, they told him that they would send an officer his way in order to get the details. It was a much better response than he had expected.

A young officer arrived at their house not more than fifteen minutes after the call. He spent a good hour asking Mariko for all the minute details about when Honoka went missing, and left.

In the end, Douno ended up filing a missing persons report to the police. Four officers arrived after he filed it, and they searched all the places that Honoka might go.

By that time, the news of Honoka gone missing had reached the entire neighbourhood. Other residents of the apartment, along with the landlord, came out to help. They searched for Honoka all night, but she was not found.

Amidst this ordeal, the only saving grace was that it was not winter. If Honoka had gotten lost and was sleeping outside, at least she would not freeze to death.

The night sky lightened into dawn. Douno was exhausted from walking around all night in his search.

“They should start sweeping the bottom of the river,” muttered an elderly neighbour who had been helping him. The river bottom—Douno's heart contracted at the thought that Honoka might not be alive.

At seven in the morning, an officer who had been searching with him spoke to Douno.

"Sir, why don't you go home once and take a rest? I'm sure you're worried, but get some sleep, even for one hour. If you don't rest up, you won't last for the days ahead." Feeling pressured, Douno rushed home. This time, Mariko ran up to him, asking him if Honoka had been found.

He had told her that he would call her immediately if he found Honoka. But it seemed Mariko could not help but ask him every time he came home.

"The police told me to take a rest," he told her. "I'm going to take a short break. After I call work to take the day off, I'll go out to look again."

Douno poured himself a glass of tap water in the kitchen and drank it. He turned around to see Mariko standing dazed by the dining table.

"Have you eaten anything?"

She shook her head, then stared at Douno.

"You're angry, aren't you?" she whispered quietly.

"What?"

"You're really angry at me. You're angry because I fell asleep, because I wasn't watching Honoka. You probably think none of this would have happened if I did my part properly—"

His wife's lips were pressed firmly together in a line, and she was trembling. She looked like she would burst from the tension that seized her whole body. Douno had been so intent on searching for Honoka that he had neglected to think about how his wife would feel being left alone at home.

"I don't think it's your fault that Honoka went missing. I would probably have fallen asleep in your situation, too. Don't beat yourself up."

He gently embraced his wife's tense body. Mariko clung to Douno and wept aloud. Douno comforted her like he would a child and laid her on the sofa. Mariko's crying seemed to have released her built-up tension, for she fell asleep some moments later.

Douno called his work and explained to Tatsuta that his daughter had gone missing. If Honoka was not found, he would have to get several days off in a row. Tatsuta appeared shocked at the news, and was speechless at first.

"You don't need to worry about work," he eventually said. "I'll do something about it. You focus on your daughter."

Douno changed out of yesterday's clothes and left the house with his wallet in hand. He bought sandwiches, rice balls, and tea at the neighbourhood convenience store and came back home. He left the food on the dining room table with a memo that read, "Make sure you eat something when you wake up." As for himself, he only drank a can of coffee.

He had told Mariko to eat, but when he imagined how hungry Honoka must be at this moment, he could not bring himself to eat anything.

Douno continued to search the vicinity of his house like he had done last night. Before noon, he was called back by an officer who told him he had something he needed to discuss.

When Douno returned home, he was met with the officer who questioned him the previous day, along with a detective in his fifties. The man's hair was thinning at the top. He was about as tall as Douno, but his beefy stature made him look stout. His eyebrows and eyes drooped slightly, and his gentle face resembled the god, Ebisu.

"Ehm, I'll be handling your case. My name is Kashiwai. Nice to meet you."

Kashiwai ducked his head. Douno and Mariko sat beside each other on the living room sofa, and Kashiwai sat across from them.

Kashiwai jumped right into his explanation. Throughout yesterday and this morning, they had searched almost every possible place within half a day's walking distance for a four-year-old child. Since she had still not turned up after this much searching, they had concluded that it was unlikely she had wandered away. As there had also been no request for a ransom, it was more likely that this was an accident or a kidnapping for unsavoury purposes.

When Douno heard "unsavoury purposes", he felt a shudder down his spine. To think of his own daughter in the hands of someone else—just the thought made him feel ill to the point of nausea.

"There might also be the possibility of a grudge. Has there been conflict with your relatives, acquaintances? Can you think of anything?"

"No," Mariko replied immediately.

"And your husband?" Kashiwai encouraged. The groping incident flashed in the back of Douno's mind.

"No. It's just that..."

"Just that...?" Kashiwai repeated Douno's words and looked up from taking notes in his notebook.

"I'll go ahead and talk about it, since it would probably come up eventually. I was in prison for ten months."

Kashiwai's narrow eyes widened in surprise.

"I was accused of groping and I got a guilty verdict. But I'll keep insisting on my innocence until the day I die. The first thing I thought of when you mentioned 'grudge' was the so-called victim at the time, the woman. But I don't think she has anything to do with this case."

"And why are you sure about that?"

"It happened about eight years ago, and I don't think the woman knows my current address. I also lost a lot more to that incident than she did."

Kashiwai scratched his balding head. "Alright, well, would I be able to get the name of that victim, just in case?"

"I don't remember."

"Huh?"

"Those were horrible memories for me. I had no freedom for close to two years while I was in the detention centre and in prison. It was... incredibly hard to go through, and I wanted so badly to forget... that I actually forgot."

"Well, nothing we can't look up," Kashiwai muttered. "Well then, seeing as how a grudge is also an unlikely motive, would I be able to hear from both of you what you were doing at the time of Honoka's disappearance? Starting with you, ma'am."

While Mariko talked, Kashiwai jumped in at each moment with the question, "Is there someone who can testify to that?" which bothered Douno.

"Um—" Douno interrupted, wondering if it was rude to do so while his wife and Kashiwai were talking. "Are my wife and I under suspicion for kidnapping as well?"

Kashiwai narrowed his eyes even more. "Well, you see, this is our job. I hope you'll bear with me," he said briskly, bowing his head.

Eventually, Douno was also asked what he was doing when Honoka disappeared. Kashiwai's questions were incredibly detailed, asking for things like the distance between Douno's house and his work.

The doorbell rang partway through Douno and Kashiwai's conversation. Mariko hastily got

the door.

"Honey," she called from the doorway. "It's Mr. Kitagawa. What should I do? He's been helping to look for Honoka since yesterday, hasn't he? We can't force him to keep helping us like this. Should I just tell him that we've decided to leave it to the police?"

"Oh, I'll talk to Kitagawa myself." Douno excused himself with a short apology to Kashiwai, and stood from his seat. At the door, he explained to Kitagawa that it did not seem to be a case of Honoka wandering off, and that they were going to leave the search to the police. Kitagawa exhaled shortly, his brow still furrowed in a difficult expression. His eyes were bloodshot from walking around with Douno all night.

"If Honoka's found, I'll contact you right away. So for now, I want you to go home and take a rest."

"Kay," Kitagawa mumbled shortly, then went home. When Douno turned around, Kashiwai was peering over from behind the door to the kitchen.

"Who was that tall man?"

"He's my friend. He lives nearby, and he's very close to Honoka. He's been helping us look for her ever since we found out she was missing."

"Uh-huh," Kashiwai nodded. "And have you known each other long?"

"Six... seven years, I think."

"Oh?" Mariko murmured. "Didn't you say he was your friend from high school?"

Douno's heart jumped. He had forgotten about his lie.

"Oh, right. Sorry, I was thinking of something else. —We've known each other for close to twenty years now."

"We might have a chance to talk to him later on," Kashiwai explained, and wrote down Kitagawa's name and address.

After that, Kashiwai continued to question Douno on every little detail about himself, but thanks to his mild tone of speech, it did not get on Douno's nerves. Last time he had been arrested, he had felt sick to the stomach at the investigating detective's arrogant attitude, not to mention the interrogation, which had practically been a blackmailing session. At the time, Douno had vowed never to get involved with the police again, but now he wondered if the police were kind to him because he was the victim this time.

His conversation with Kashiwai finished past four in the afternoon. The police had begun to sweep the river-bottom earlier on, but nothing had turned up by evening. Douno was quite frankly relieved.

Douno and Mariko stayed at home and waited expectantly for any news. Kashiwai came by again at eight in the evening to tell them that interviews with the nearby residents had yielded a witness. It was the first piece of concrete information they had since Honoka had gone missing.

Kashiwai repeatedly wiped his forehead with his handkerchief even though it was not hot out.

"The thing is, the witness is a child in second grade. Children's eye-witness statements change every time you ask them differently, so I think we should take it with a grain of salt. Anyway, according to this child, Honoka was apparently seen walking eastward down the road in front of this building at around one-thirty yesterday, holding hands with a tall man wearing a dark hat."

The first person Douno thought of when he heard "tall man" was Kitagawa.

"But to a second-grader, every adult is tall," Kashiwai continued. "We don't have an exact

measurement of his height, but now we can say there's a strong suspicion of a kidnapping. I've just finished discussing this with my senior colleagues, and we think it's a good idea to take the leap and make this search public, if even just to put the kidnapper in the hot seat."

Mariko showed no signs of breaking down as she sat beside Douno on the sofa. She only chewed her lip and listened to the detective speak.

"There's a risk that we might agitate the kidnapper, but by making this search public, we eliminate the option for him to take Honoka out anywhere. If the kidnapper has done this for some unsavory motive, this is when he's most likely to release the victim. We think we have a better chance of rescuing your daughter this way, rather than just sitting and waiting. However—" Kashiwai went on, "as I said, there's a risk we may agitate the kidnapper and drive him to do something impulsive. But since the victim is a four-year-old child, when we do rescue her, it would be difficult to make a composite sketch or have her match photographs from her memory. If the kidnapper knows he's in no danger of being traced even after returning the child to her parents, I'm sure he won't choose to silence her forever."

Mariko, who had been silent until then, murmured quietly.

"The kidnapper is a tall man?"

Kashiwai twitched his right eyebrow.

"Ma'am, do you have an idea of who it might be?"

Mariko threw a glance Douno's way. He sensed what his wife was implying, but he swiftly denied himself. It could not be Kitagawa. A man who had been so affectionate towards Honoka would never kidnap her.

"But he's my husband's friend and he's been very good to Honoka." Mariko modestly but firmly informed Kashiwai of Kitagawa's existence.

"Mariko, stop it," Douno said sharply. Mariko flinched at his stern tone. "Kitagawa is the last person who would do that," Douno said.

"I—It's not like I think Mr. Kitagawa kidnapped her," Mariko said. "I don't *want* to think he has. But I keep thinking about why he didn't come over yesterday out of all days."

"Alright, alright," Kashiwai intervened. He flipped through the pages of the notebook he had been writing in.

"Mr. Kitagawa is the friend who dropped by earlier today, am I right? I got a glimpse of him, and you're right, he certainly is tall. But that's not the only reason you think it might be him, is it?" Kashiwai leaned in towards Mariko.

"Mr. Kitagawa always used to keep our daughter company on Sunday afternoons. But he didn't come that day."

"I see," Kashiwai nodded. "Every week on Sunday, did you say?"

"Lately, every week, yes," Mariko answered.

"Hmm," said Kashiwai, rubbing his chin. "So a grown adult like him, playing with a such a young child as yours? He must really love children."

There was an unpleasant ring to his last sentence.

"Honey," Mariko grasped Douno's arm. "Since we've come this far already, why don't we let them investigate thoroughly? If they find out it's not him, it would be a relief to both of us. Don't you think so?"

Douno shook his head.

"Investigating him means we're suspicious of him. Don't you think that's an insult to Kitagawa at all? He even took a whole day off of work to spend it looking for Honoka. I don't want

to stab my own friend in the back.”

“Then can you prove that Mr. Kitagawa definitely didn’t do it?” Mariko argued. “I understand you want to believe in him, but it bothers me. I’m not convinced, and I hate thinking that it might be him. That’s why I want to get rid of those uncertainties early on.”

In the end, Kashiwai said he would talk to Kitagawa once about it. Douno and Mariko’s argument about whether they would have Kitagawa interviewed or not left an awkward air lingering between them even after Kashiwai left. In the end, Douno could not bring himself to forgive Mariko for stubbornly insisting on having Kitagawa questioned.

He admitted he too had imagined Kitagawa when he was told that the kidnapper was a tall man with whom Honoka was friendly enough to hold hands and walk. *Maybe it is him*—the thought had indeed crossed his mind. But Douno felt he owed Kitagawa his trust—that was integrity.

At eleven at night, Honoka’s disappearance was broadcast on the news with their real names for the first time. Douno and Mariko watched it together in the living room.

“Yesterday at around two in the afternoon, a little girl was reported missing. Honoka Douno, aged four, is the eldest daughter of Mr. Takafumi Douno, an office worker from — City, — Prefecture. The police suspect this is a case of an abduction of a minor...”

Honoka’s name came up in the subtitles, and the newscaster read it aloud. Until now, Douno had watched countless similar newscasts of abducted children. As a parent himself, they had made him feel afraid and conscious about his own child’s safety. However, in the end they were always the “unlucky kids”—he had never quite been able to feel the reality in them.

As soon as the news of Honoka began airing, their home phone and cell phones began ringing at once. Relatives and friends were calling, concerned about Honoka’s safety. Douno saw it coming, since Kashiwai had informed them beforehand that they would be bombarded with calls once the news aired on TV.

“I’m sure Honoka is alright. Be strong, both of you.” Each person said the same typical words of consolation. Each time, Douno thanked them and hung up the phone. He was careful to be polite, since they were calling out of the goodwill of their hearts. He was grateful for their concern, but he and Mariko had hardly slept these past few days. Douno only wished they could be left alone.

The phone rang incessantly for an hour, and finally past midnight, the calls began to die off. Mariko looked utterly exhausted from her own worries coupled with the burden of taking phone calls. Douno encouraged her to sleep in bed.

Mariko insisted she was not tired, but Douno managed to push her between the sheets anyway. He then put his cell phone and the cordless handset on the table so that he was prepared to receive any calls from the police or acquaintances, and lay down on the sofa in the living room.

Douno’s lack of sleep these past few days caught up to him, and he lost consciousness once the clock struck three o’clock in the morning. In the early hours, at around five-thirty, he woke up to his cell phone ringing.

Douno had been dreaming right up until then. It was a dream that Honoka had been found on the jungle gym in the park. Wondering why they had been unable to find her all this time, he had hugged Honoka firmly to his chest and gone around to thank and apologize to every single neighbour he had caused trouble to, and to each person who had helped him search for his daughter.

“Mr. Takafumi Douno? This is Kashiwai from the Seinan Division,” Kashiwai said over the

phone.

"Good morning," Douno answered. "Thank you for your hard work this early in the morning. Have you gotten any news on Honoka?"

For some reason, there was a short pause on the other end before Kashiwai answered.

"I wish I didn't have to break this to you, but..." The detective's voice dropped a level. Douno had a foreboding feeling. He swallowed hard.

"What is it?"

"This morning at around four-thirty, the body of a young girl was found near the mouth of Minanogawa River. Upon comparing her physical features with photos of her face, we think it may be Honoka Douno. We would like both of you to confirm her identity."

Douno heard all the blood in his body rush to his feet.

"Would you be able to come to the address I'm about to give you?"

"Oh, but—" His hand shook as he held his cell phone. "It just happened to be a little girl, and you're not definitely sure about whether she's Honoka, right?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"I'll head over right away. The place?" Douno wrote it down, and hung up his cell phone. Just then, Mariko's voice spoke from behind him.

"Hey."

Douno spun around in surprise.

"Who was that from?"

Douno was unsure of whether he should tell his exhausted wife what he had just heard. But either way, he would have to explain why he was going out. He could not hide it from her.

"It was from the detective."

Mariko's face lit up. "Has Honoka been found?" She rushed over to him and clung to his arm. "So, has she? Has she?" Douno shook his head.

"They found a little girl's body. He asked me to come and confirm if it's Honoka."

Mariko turned white as a sheet and cried shrilly as she fell to her knees.

"We don't know if it's Honoka for sure yet," Douno said. "That's why we have to go and make sure."

Mariko clamped her hands over her ears and shook her head vehemently.

"No! I won't go. I won't go, no matter what."

"I don't think it's Honoka, either. But I'm going just in case. You can stay here."

Douno left his wife and began to prepare to go out. Right when he was about to leave, Mariko stopped him.

"Wait," she said. "—I'll go, too."

Without even bothering to put on makeup, Mariko draped a coat over her shoulders and climbed into the passenger seat. While they drove to the hospital according to Kashiwai's directions, Mariko sat trembling in her seat with both hands clasped tightly together.

When they arrived at the hospital's after-hours reception desk, Kashiwai and another young detective were waiting. A man who looked like a clerk then led them down the hall and to a desolate-looking place.

It was a barren room. Even the lights did not change its cold atmosphere. A small cot was placed in the centre of the room, and a white sheet was draped over it. Ushered by Kashiwai, Douno approached the small lump beneath the sheet.

"If I could ask you to confirm her identity, please..."

Before Douno could even brace himself, the cloth over the face was pulled away.

Her pale cheeks and drained purple lips were not features of any living human. The girl's eyes were closed and she almost looked as if she were sleeping. She looked a lot like Honoka.

"Is she your daughter?" Douno was asked.

"It looks like her. But I can't say for sure." Douno told the truth. Kashiwai scratched the back of his head.

"Did your daughter have any distinguishing traits? Like a mole, or a bruise anywhere on her body..."

Mariko, who had been behind Douno this whole time, came quietly forward. She slowly and cautiously stepped closer to the body. She stared intently at her child's ashen face, then suddenly flung her arms around the body and burst into tears.

"Ma'am, is she your daughter?"

Mariko did not answer. In this lonely room, only his wife's sobbing echoed painfully.

"Honoka, Honoka."

Mariko stroked the wet hair on her small head over and over.

"I'm sorry, Honoka. I'm sorry we couldn't find you sooner. I'm sorry..."

The detective turned to Douno. "This is your daughter, then, am I correct?" he said gravely.

Douno did not want to admit that the body before him was Honoka. He wanted to think that it was just a very similar-looking stranger, and that his own Honoka was still alive. Only two days ago, she had been scurrying about, bursting with energy. She was a strong girl who had never suffered any serious illnesses.

"—Once your wife calms down, we'd like to send the body out for an autopsy," Kashiwai said quietly beside Douno.

"You mean... you're going to cut her up?"

Kashiwai sighed apologetically.

"It's the rules to perform autopsies on bodies that have died unnaturally. But by performing an autopsy, we can find the cause and time of death. It'll give us important clues as to who her killer might be."

Mariko was still clinging to the small body. Douno put his arm around his wife's thin shoulders and drew her away from the body.

Mariko trembled violently as she shook her head.

"N—No! I'm going to take her home right away!" she sobbed. "What do you need to investigate her for? She's dead! What more are you going to put her through?"

"But they need to investigate her, or else Honoka can't come home."

"No! No!"

"Mariko!" Douno called his wife's name loudly. Mariko, who had been screaming and clawing at her hair, stopped and looked fearfully up at him.

"Let's wait outside. We'll be able to take Honoka home soon. Come on..."

Douno put his arm around his wife's shoulders and led her out into the hallway. They were taken by the clerk to a small waiting room near the after-hours reception and told to wait there until it was "all over".

Mariko staggered on unsteady feet and collapsed onto the sofa.

"Her cheeks... they were cold," she whispered shakily while she gazed at her fingers. "Like ice. So cold..."

Douno put his arms around Mariko as she broke down into tears. He closed his own eyes

as tears welled up in them. Why did Honoka—why did his own daughter have to go through this? Had it been painful when she died? Had she suffered? He wished he could have taken her place if he could.

“Mr. Douno.”

Douno looked up as his name was called. Kashiwai was peering in from the entrance to the waiting room.

“I was wondering if you could spare some time to talk... is that alright?”

Douno rubbed his tearful eyes with a rough hand.

“But I’ll be leaving my wife by herself.”

“Ah, that’s right,” Kashiwai murmured. “Hey, you stay with the madam,” he said to the young officer beside him. He left the officer in the waiting room and took Douno out to the hallway.

“It’s about the killer,” Kashiwai began as they stood in a corner of the dark hallway.

“Have you caught him?” Douno sniffled as he spoke.

“I wouldn’t say caught, but we have strong suspicions that it’s a man we’ve been questioning as a material witness.”

“What kind of person is he?”

“He’s someone you know, Mr. Douno,” Kashiwai answered. *No*—Douno thought. *It can’t be—*

“Are you saying Kitagawa’s under suspicion?”

The detective nodded.

“Are you sure you’re not mistaken? He could never be the killer, it’s just impossible. He was very affectionate to Honoka—”

“The man has several suspicious points. According to your wife, he used to come over to your house every Sunday without fail, but the one day Honoka got kidnapped, he failed to show up. The man himself says he’d been drinking until morning, and was asleep since getting home around nine in the morning that day. Yes, he has an alibi right up to when he parted ways with his fellow workers in the morning, but there’s nothing to prove he was actually asleep afterwards except for his own testimony. He doesn’t have an alibi.”

“But logically, wouldn’t it be difficult to prove that you were sleeping?”

“Yes, but you see,” Kashiwai continued. “On the day of the disappearance, your wife called Kitagawa’s house once past five in the evening. But he didn’t pick up. He says he was sleeping so soundly he didn’t hear the phone, but isn’t it possible that he couldn’t pick up because he wasn’t there?”

Douno remembered that Kitagawa had also not picked up when he called that day.

“And additionally, we’ve also had the primary-school student come in, the one who witnessed Honoka walking with a tall man. We had him look at Kitagawa through a one-way mirror. The child testified that Kitagawa looked ‘a lot like’ the man walking with Honoka.”

“Yes, but—!” Douno clenched his fists. “When Honoka disappeared, he was the first to volunteer to help look for her. He even took time off work.”

Kashiwai shook his head slowly.

“Have you considered that it might all be a performance to disguise the fact that he did it?”

Douno’s eyes widened in shock. His clenched fists trembled.

“But he has no reason to kidnap and kill Honoka.”

“From what your wife has told us, Kitagawa seems to be very nice to children.”

"Yes. Honoka also liked him very much."

"Sure, he may have simply liked being with children, but can you rule out the possibility that he may have had unsavoury impulses?"

"But Kitagawa of all people—"

Kashiwai scratched his balding head.

"This is incredibly difficult to say to you, as you are the father, but we think Kitagawa's unsavoury objectives are at the root of his crime and this case."

Douno felt ill. It was more sickening to know that his own child had been seen in that way than to hear Kashiwai suggest that Kitagawa was responsible.

"There's also the possibility of lust murder. He has a former criminal record for that, and—"

"His record doesn't matter!" Douno found himself snapping, with a voice loud enough to startle Kashiwai. "It has nothing to do with it. Kitagawa's served his sentence properly. Besides, if he'd been investigated properly earlier on, right after he'd been arrested, it might've turned out that he didn't kill anyone at all. That's how it could have turned out." Douno was out of breath after his outburst.

"No one knows him better than me." Douno placed his right hand over his chest. Kashiwai looked curiously troubled at Douno's earnest plea.

"I can see how you don't want to admit that he's done it because you know him, but it is true that Kitagawa is a suspect. He has no alibi, he has an eye-witness statement against him, and a criminal record of murder. We're not pulling things out of thin air here."

Douno chewed his lip.

"You can say he didn't do it because you know him, but if our evidence becomes concrete enough to suspect him, we *will* arrest Kitagawa. That's the law."

Crushed by the detective's words and by the truth, Douno returned to the waiting room. He drew his wife close as she continued to cry. Douno was also sad, but even more than that, he felt uncontrollably angry.

Why would Kitagawa kill a child whom he had seriously talked of marrying? How could he ever?

Why won't they believe me? Douno thought. Was it because Kitagawa did not have an alibi? Because he had a criminal record? Did the police think they could conveniently draw up Kitagawa as the killer?

Kitagawa didn't do it. He definitely didn't do it. But in a corner of Douno's heart there was still a tiny black stain—the black stain of "maybe".

Douno refused to think of anything anymore.

They decided to take Honoka's body home once. It was ten in the morning by the time they returned to the apartment. The sky, heedless of the grieving family, was a clear, cloudless blue.

They tucked Honoka into her child-size futon, just like they used to when she was alive. Douno and Mariko knelt on either side of the futon without a word.

"Who put Honoka through all of this?" Mariko murmured softly. Her words stabbed Douno's heart. "She was only four. Just four years old. What did she ever do wrong? Why did it have to be her?"

Mariko dissolved into tears over the tiny body. Douno was not sure whether he should tell her that Kitagawa was a suspect.

Mariko was suspicious of Kitagawa, but probably did not wish him to be the killer. When Douno thought of the despair of being betrayed by a trusted person, he felt it better not to tell his wife, who was already barely coping with her daughter's death.

He wondered what he could do instead, and realized he would have to tell his parents. Then, he would have to plan the funeral—

His own daughter was dead, yet Douno felt like he was almost too calm. Perhaps it was out of a sense of duty to be strong for his wife because she was crying.

"Let's call our parents."

Mariko lifted her face.

"And then we have to arrange the funeral."

"Don't say that word!" Mariko covered her ears and put her head down. "I don't want to hear any of it!"

Douno could not blame his wife for not wanting to accept reality. But neither could they sit here and do nothing.

Douno called both of their parents, who had been worried ever since finding out Honoka had gone missing. After telling them that she'd been found dead, neither Douno nor his and Mariko's parents had any words to say.

After giving their parents the news, Douno contacted a nearby funeral home. Once he had completed all of the procedures, he glanced at the clock and realized it was already four in the afternoon.

The house phone rang suddenly. He picked it up. It was Douno's mother.

"I saw on TV—they caught the killer, didn't they?"

"What?" Douno uttered in disbelief.

"One of our relatives phoned—I heard you know this man?"

Douno did not remember the rest of what they talked about and how their conversation finished. He vaguely recalled his mother mentioning something about coming down here sometime within today.

He hastily went over to the TV and turned it on. He flipped through the channels searching for a news program.

"Two days ago in the afternoon, a kidnapping was reported. The victim was a four-year-old girl, Honoka Douno, daughter of Mr. Takafumi Douno, an officer worker of — City, — Prefecture. Honoka was found dead near the mouth of a river about fifteen kilometres away from her home. There was no apparent damage to the body, and the cause of death is thought to be drowning. A man in his thirties, a construction worker living in the neighbourhood who is an acquaintance of Mr. Douno, is thought to be connected to this case and is currently undergoing questioning."

As Douno sat fixated on the television, he heard his wife call him from behind.

"Hey."

Douno whipped around.

"Was Mr. Kitagawa the killer?"

"—They don't know for sure yet."

"But they just said he might be connected to the case. It's him, isn't it?"

His wife grabbed both his arms and shook him roughly.

"Answer me!"

Douno answered without looking at Mariko's face.

"They told me it's likely."

"I knew it," muttered Mariko. "I knew there was something funny about him from the beginning. He was a bit strange. He never talked to us, but always played with Honoka. I thought he just liked kids, but that was all a show, wasn't it?"

"No, I really think Kitagawa cared about—"

"Does a man who care about kids kill them?" Mariko shrieked. "What's wrong with him? We always invited him over to eat. He should be thankful—what reason does he have to hate us? Why did you ever become friends with someone like him?!"

Douno could not bring himself to say they were not old friends, and that they had actually met in prison.

"Answer me, please!" Mariko pressed tearfully to the man unable to respond to her.

Douno and Mariko's parents both arrived by eight that evening. Douno's father handled the funeral processes in Douno's place, as he had no idea how to go about it.

On the nine o'clock news, Kitagawa began to be referred to as "the suspect", and his real name and picture was released. His criminal record for murder also came to light. Mariko flew off the handle when she heard the fact.

"You knew, didn't you?" she screamed.

Mariko's mother held her as she broke down.

"You knew that that man killed someone before. How could you still introduce him to us, knowing what kind of man he was? How could you have let him play with Honoka?"

"He's atoned for his crime," Douno protested. "Besides, Kitagawa actually might not have killed—"

"But he did this time, didn't he?! He killed Honoka!"

Douno could not argue back. He could only bow his head as the blame was piled upon him. Mariko's parents also shouted at him.

"How could you let your family associate with a murderer?"

Even Douno's parents bowed their heads to Mariko's parents, apologizing on behalf of their son.

It was too late now to say that Kitagawa had helped Douno immeasurably while he was in prison.

Rather than be pitied for the death of his child, Douno was blamed by the people around him for being acquainted with an ex-convict, and to have involved his wife and child with the likes of such a man.

Even at the vigil, he could hear voices whispering around him. *The man was the husband's friend.* It was unbearable for Douno to hear. He was just as heartbroken from losing his child as Mariko, yet Douno had to be blamed and turned into the scapegoat.

Mariko cried throughout the vigil and the funeral. A television reporter came to the funeral asking Douno to comment, but he was unable to say anything.

Once the funeral was over, everyone disappeared like the receding tide. As soon as things quieted down, Mariko collapsed as if a tense thread had snapped. Douno rushed her to the hospital, where the doctor informed him that it was likely due to mental fatigue.

"—Also, your wife is pregnant," he added. She was in her second month.

Mariko, who was still unable to accept Honoka's death, appeared unable to accept the fact that there was another budding life inside her. She remained expressionless at the news, nodding and responding as if it were about someone else.

But Douno was glad that Mariko was pregnant. Before, he had thought it a bad idea

financially to have a second child, but after all that had happened, he felt it was better for Mariko to have something to live for. He had been careful with contraception, but he now felt like this timing couldn't have been better.

Three days after the funeral, Douno went to work for the first time in about a week. Tatsuta, who knew what he was going through, was more attentive than necessary, which made Douno feel even more suffocated.

By the time the day was over, Douno was mentally weary. At seven in the evening, he had returned home and was parking his car in the lot when he saw a familiar face approaching him from across the street. It was the detective, Kashiwai, who had handled Honoka's case.

"Hello." Kashiwai ducked his head.

"Thank you for everything." Douno bowed his head as well.

"There's actually been a new witness statement concerning Honoka's case, and I'd like to ask you two or three things about it."

Douno wondered whether he should bring Kashiwai to his house or not. Mariko had finally calmed down. If they talked about Honoka in front of her and she broke down, she could harm her pregnant body.

"Um—well, my wife has only just started to return to normal. Is it alright if we talk here?"

"Oh, of course," Kashiwai answered. Douno ended up talking to Kashiwai in his car.

"I'm sure you know that the police have arrested Kitagawa as a suspect. He had no alibi during the time he abducted Honoka, and also during her estimated time of death at four o'clock in the evening. There's also the witness statement from the primary-school student. The man himself denies it, but no matter."

"He's saying he didn't do it?"

"Well," Kashiwai tilted his head, "since there was an eye-witness statement, we moved ahead with the arrest. But as of two days ago, we've had gotten a new witness account."

"A new one?"

"We had a phone call from a middle school student. He's told us he saw someone standing at Gancho Bridge on the day of the incident."

The media had aired Honoka's death as due to drowning from being pushed off a bridge. Gancho Bridge was the nearest bridge to the river-mouth where Honoka had been found.

"He was about to cross the bridge on the way home from his club activities when he saw a tall woman in dark clothes looking below the bridge and smiling. He remembered it because of how disturbing it was."

"Woman?" Douno repeated.

"The student's parents called the police two days ago, saying it bothered them. There were numerous other points of note, so we're still investigating."

"So does that mean that Kitagawa might not be the killer?"

"We don't know," Kashiwai said. "We still think it is, but you can never be too certain."

Kashiwai rubbed the top of his nose.

"So... it seems your wife quit her part-time job—the month before last, was it? Have you heard from her why she quit?"

"She said she didn't get along with her co-workers."

Kashiwai listened to Douno talk about his wife, then left without asking anything more. After the man had gone, Douno sat alone in his car and thought. Once the police decided on a possible perpetrator, they looked for evidence to prove that he was it. Either that, or they

fabricated it. But if the police were still investigating even after catching the suspect, it was likely that the killer was another person.

Douno leaned his forehead against the steering wheel. Kitagawa may not be the killer after all—that fact alone was enough to make Douno's heart feel lighter.

Four days after Douno returned to work, he got a call from Kashiwai again. Douno was still at work when his cell phone rang, and he scrambled hastily into the hallway to answer it.

"We've arrested the suspect." Kashiwai's voice was brisk and businesslike. "We'd like to talk to you about it. Would you be able to come to the police station with your wife?"

Douno hesitated.

"My wife is pregnant and in delicate condition. Would I be able to go alone instead?"

"Your wife is also involved in this case, and we'd also like to confirm two or three things with her. I'm sorry for the trouble, but we'd like the both of you to come."

Douno could tell from Kashiwai's tone that he was not going to budge. He gave in and took Mariko to the police station with him.

"Why do we have to go to the police again?" Mariko asked. Douno decided against telling her everything at once, and only told her that the real killer had been found.

"Isn't the killer that man?"

"The detective will tell us the details. I don't know them myself."

Mariko wore a dubious expression in the car throughout the journey. When they arrived at the police station and gave the reception Kashiwai's name, they were shown into a small room. Douno and his wife sat down beside each other.

"I've already spoken a little to your husband about it, but we've arrested the suspect who is responsible for murdering Honoka."

Mariko's lips were pursed stiffly as she clasped Douno's hand.

"It wasn't Kitagawa?"

Kashiwai shook his head.

"The suspect's name is Eri Taguchi. Do you know of her?"

Douno shook his head, but Mariko suddenly turned pale.

"Mariko, do you know her?" Douno asked her, but Mariko shook her head in a way that neither affirmed nor denied knowledge.

"Eri Taguchi is the wife of Hiroyuki Taguchi, the manager of Sun Supermarket, where your wife used to work. She was apparently a former model, close to 180 centimetres in height. Her hair is short. With a black hat on, a grade school student could easily mistake her for a man."

"You weren't getting along with the manager's wife as well?"

Mariko bowed her head and covered her ears with her hands.

"You haven't heard anything, have you, sir?"

Douno still could not perceive what lay behind the knowing words between Kashiwai and his wife.

"Your wife and the manager of Sun Supermarket, Hiroyuki Taguchi, have been in an extramarital relationship for two years. This is clear from witness statements from other employees. Your wife quit her job because rumours of their relationship were starting to circulate—am I right, ma'am?"

Douno froze with his eyes wide open. His mind could not keep up with such an

unexpected turn of events. He managed to jerk his head toward his wife and ask her, "Is that true?"

There was no answer.

"Eri Taguchi has testified to feeling hatred towards your wife for being her husband's extramarital partner, and has testified to killing Honoka to teach your wife a lesson."

Mariko's face was white as she trembled violently.

"The Taguchi couple doesn't have children. They've been getting fertilization treatment for close to ten years now. When Eri Taguchi found out her husband was having an affair with a young woman, she confessed the anger got to her head."

Douno's wife burst into tears beside him. He could hear her sobbing. Douno looked down at his own fingers, white from clenching his fists.

His wife had said at every spare moment that she loved him. She had called him a kind husband. She had said she was happy. If she was satisfied with her life now, why had she carried on an affair for two years?

Douno could not understand the woman crying beside him anymore. He could not even fathom what his wife was crying about.

When they returned to their apartment, Mariko shut herself up in the bedroom. Douno sat in the living room drinking liquor while sorting out the facts in his head. Mariko had had an affair with her boss at work. The man's wife had found out. Consumed by wrath, the wife had killed innocent Honoka.

Douno wondered who was to blame. Was it his wife, who had betrayed him and continued an affair for two years? Was it Douno himself, who failed to realize he was being cheated on for two years?

In retrospect, there were numerous clues of an affair. The necklace he did not recognize—perhaps that was a present from her lover. When he had pointed out the red mark on Mariko's neck the night she had gone out for dinner with a friend, Mariko had panicked. Perhaps that was a sexual mark. And the phone, which had always been conveniently hung up just as he came home...

Should he have been more cautious? His own wife, who had not made a single complaint about his low salary—Douno had thought she would be the last person to have an affair.

I've been betrayed. The thought refused to leave him. He had tried to protect his family, but he had been betrayed. Douno drained the liquor in one draught. Did all this happen because of his inadequacy? Was the other man more attractive than him?

Douno cradled his head. He was angry, hurt, and sad. He thought and thought some more, and a possibility arose in his head. He headed to the bedroom, where his wife was.

Mariko was curled up in a corner of the room like a child.

"Mariko."

His wife lifted her tearful face. Douno kept about a metre's distance as he stood across from her.

"Um—" The next words were stuck in his mouth. It was humiliating to even have to vocalize them. "Did you love him?"

There was no answer from Mariko.

"If you really loved him, you should have told me you wanted to end our relationship."

Sometimes people fall in love after they get married. Sometimes, you just feel that way and... there's nothing you can do about it."

Mariko shook her head.

"I didn't love him that much," came her answer in a thin, quiet voice. "I love you more. You probably won't believe me, though."

It was beyond Douno's understanding. If she loved him more, why had she cheated on him? Why had she slept with another man?

"But every day was so dull," she went on. "I was happy, but every day was the same. When I wondered if I was going to grow old spending every single day like this, I was terrified. That was when he asked me. I'd only seen affairs on drama shows and magazines, and I was surprised these things could actually happen, but... I wasn't serious."

"You continued a relationship you weren't serious about for two years?"

Mariko shook her head.

"At first, it was just for fun. But he got serious about it, and said he'd divorce his wife. I didn't want anything more to do with it, so I tried to break up with him. But then he threatened to let you know, and by that time it'd already been a year, and I was attached to him, so I just kind of kept..."

Douno bit his lip.

"You ended up hurting his wife and me as a result of what you did 'for fun'."

"I never knew," Mariko mumbled.

"You know having a relationship with a married person would end up hurting *someone*, don't you? You're not a child anymore."

As Douno scolded his wife, he wondered whether she had always been this kind of selfish woman. To him, she had always been an observant, responsible person who cared about others.

"You're angry at me, aren't you?" Mariko glared at Douno. "Honoka was murdered because I cheated on you. It's all my fault, isn't it? You didn't do anything wrong."

"Mariko..."

"I'm suffering, too," she said shrilly. "Don't look at me like it's all my fault! I *know* it's bad to have an affair. If I knew my daughter was going to be killed, I would never have cheated in the first place. But is it *all* my fault? Does everyone who cheat have their child killed? No! His wife just happened to be jealous and disturbed in the head, and that's how it ended up like this!"

Mariko banged her fists on the floor.

"Why do I have to be the one to go through all of this? My child was murdered—I've lost my daughter! Why do I have to be blamed by everyone?"

Douno could not think of any consoling words to say to her. Her selfishness exasperated and saddened him. Every human had weaknesses—he knew that. He knew, but...

A horrifying thought crossed Douno's mind as he looked down at his wife. She had been cheating all this time. There was a possibility that—no, of all things, she would never—but once the seed of suspicion was planted, it was impossible to erase no matter how hard he tried.

"That baby in your stomach... is it really mine?"

Mariko's shoulders twitched.

"We've always used birth control, haven't we? But they say it's never a hundred-percent guaranteed, so I thought this time was just..."

"I don't know."

She did not deny it completely. Douno could not help but press further.

"Did you use birth control with him?"

"How could you ask me something like that?" Mariko snapped.

"It's important. If you didn't, it might be his child."

Mariko chewed her lip hard. "We didn't," she mumbled. The world went dark before Douno's eyes.

"He said he physically couldn't have children... that he barely produced any sperm, so he could come inside me and it would be okay. That's why..."

"Why didn't you tell me that it might not be my child?"

"It was hard for me, too!" Mariko insisted. "But how could I say that after what we've been going through? Tell you I'm pregnant with someone else's baby right after Honoka's died?"

"Then, what were you planning to do?" Douno demanded. "If I hadn't known anything, if I hadn't found out, would you have given birth to that man's baby and raised it as our own?"

"You want me to abort it, then?" his wife shot back challengingly. Douno felt like he had been punched in the face.

"This baby is probably his. Timing-wise, I feel like it is. When I told him, he cried and begged me to have it. He pleaded with me not to kill it."

Douno's breath caught in his throat.

"But I'm your wife, so if you tell me to abort it, I will."

Douno's lips trembled in anger. Why was his wife trying to unload a matter as important as a human life entirely upon him? Why was she trying to thrust upon him her part of her mistake, her responsibility, when Douno had played no part in it? Was this decision one that he necessarily had to make?

At first, he had been glad to hear about the budding life inside Mariko's belly, despite their situation. The fact remained the same, there was still a child there; yet Douno felt his sympathy begin to diminish rapidly at an almost alarming rate.

"You're telling me to love it?" Douno said quietly. "You want me to love that child, that living proof that you betrayed me?"

"My body might have betrayed you, but my heart hasn't," Mariko pleaded. "I still love you. I love you so much. I was so happy every time my friends and everyone told me 'Mariko, you have such a kind husband'."

"Kind"—Mariko's words passed through his ears unheard. It stirred no happiness in him; in fact, it stirred no emotion in him at all. Douno left the bedroom and returned to the living room. He sat on the sofa for a while, but unable to bear it anymore, he grabbed his car keys and burst out of the house.

He jammed the key into the ignition and violently started the engine. He was not set on going anywhere. He only drove wherever the car would take him, repeatedly making the kind of reckless passes he could never have imagined from his regular self. Cars honked at him from behind as if to yell at him.

Soon, it began to rain. The traffic lights turned red. Douno slammed on the brakes, sending his car spinning out into the middle of the intersection.

There were no oncoming cars or cars behind him, so he did not end up in an accident. Douno's arms still trembled violently from the shock. He remained in the middle of the intersection for quite some time, causing other cars to honk at him repeatedly.

Douno thought he would die from spinning out, and that woke him to his senses. He passed through the intersection and drove slowly. He eventually arrived in front of the bridge

where Honoka was thought to have been pushed off. Douno and his wife had come to this bridge just once after the incident. They had left quickly after putting down Honoka's favourite flowers and sweets. They had not wanted to linger for long.

Douno got out of his car. Without even bothering to get an umbrella, he began to cross the bridge. In the middle were mounds of flowers and sweets left in memorial. He gazed at them while being drenched by the freezing rain. The sidewalk was lit up for an instant by a car's passing headlights, and his eye caught vivid yellow flowers. They were arranged in a neat ring. When Douno picked it up, he could see the short stems bound neatly with thread.

Douno returned to his car and drove without a second thought, making his way to the single detached house in the outskirts of the residential area. He parked his car in the empty lot beside it.

There were no street lamps around the dilapidated house, which looked like it would collapse any minute. As Douno entered the gates, the entrance and yard were also darkened.

Douno banged on the sliding door with both hands.

"Kitagawa, Kitagawa," he called over and over. Eventually the yard lit up a little as the lights were turned on inside. Shortly, a light went on in the entrance as well, and the sliding door rattled as it was opened.

Maybe Kitagawa had been sleeping. The man squinted his eyes as he looked silently down at Douno.

"You were kept in detention all this time, weren't you, because they mistakenly thought you were the killer?"

"Doesn't matter," Kitagawa answered in his usual flat manner.

"I'm so sorry," Douno apologized. "It must have been so frustrating for you."

Kitagawa smiled faintly.

"It's not your fault that I got arrested. They kept pressuring me to say I killed her, and they questioned me every day from morning to night, but it was no big deal. But they suddenly let me go this morning. I wonder why?"

It's because the real killer was caught. It's because the police didn't have to twist a convenient person's story to make him into the murderer anymore.

Douno wondered if the police had given Kitagawa a proper apology for mistakenly arresting him, and for detaining him for several days.

"Why are you wet?"

Douno had completely forgotten that he was drenched until Kitagawa pointed it out.

"Oh, I was just—walking outside, and I forgot my umbrella."

"And have you come to blame me?"

Douno was surprised. Kitagawa had been the one forced through an unpleasant experience; he had been mistaken as the killer just for being tall and spending a lot of time with Honoka. He was not to blame. If anything, Douno was the one causing all of his troubles in the first place.

When the detective had told him Kitagawa was a possible suspect, Douno had outwardly denied it, while at the same time carrying a small suspicion in his heart. He had not been able to completely believe Kitagawa. If he really had, he would have made his objection heard, and he would have gone to see Kitagawa in person at the detention centre. *I'm a coward. I abandoned a man with no friends to defend him as soon as I found out that he might be the killer. I knew he was totally alone, and yet I still—*

"I saw a crown of yellow flowers on the bridge," Douno explained. "I thought it was probably you, and I came to say thanks."

"I would've made a hundred, two hundred, as much as it took," Kitagawa mumbled. "That day, I promised I'd go over in the afternoon, but I drank too much and overslept. If I'd gone to your place as I promised, Honoka wouldn't have died."

Kitagawa's eyes were distant, as if his gaze were fixed on something beyond the night.

"If I'd kept my promise, she wouldn't have died."

"It's not your fault," Douno insisted. "There was a lot going on. It was an unlucky incident."

"To hell with luck," Kitagawa spat. "The fact is, if I'd gone, Honoka wouldn't have died." He repeated stubbornly. "She wouldn't have died. I didn't want her to die."

Tears spilled from Kitagawa's eyes.

"Tell me, am I being punished? Is that why someone important to me had to die? I killed a guy. But I went to jail. I was there for ten years. Wasn't that enough to atone for my crime? Or—"

Kitagawa looked at Douno.

"Did the guy I kill have people who loved him—people who hate me now? Is that why the people I care about have to be killed in the same way?"

"No, this is—"

"Because it doesn't make sense any other way," Kitagawa interrupted. "I didn't feel anything towards killing that guy. But because I killed him, there must be someone out there who feels how I feel right now. Did I bring this on myself? Tell me," he demanded. "You always know a lot about everything."

"I'm going to say this again, but it's not your fault," Douno said steadily. "If anything, it was a problem between my wife and me. You're not to blame. None of this is your fault."

"If it's not my fault, why did she die?" yelled Kitagawa. His voice rang out across the rainy yard. Douno felt wracked with pain to look at the man in front of him.

"—Fate just made it happen that way. There's no reason for you to blame yourself... you don't need to feel that it's your fault. Even if you didn't come over that day—if Mariko hadn't fallen asleep, if I hadn't gone to work on my day off, maybe it wouldn't have happened."

Kitagawa pressed a hand to his forehead.

"I shouldn't have thought your kid was cute. She said she liked me, that's why... that's why it hurts so much—"

Douno touched his cheek, wanting to comfort him somehow. Kitagawa slowly raised his head.

"Are you gonna die someday?"

Douno felt a chill pass over his heart.

"I am."

"When you die, what's gonna happen to me?"

He could not answer. Kitagawa clenched Douno's right hand tightly. At the same time, Douno felt a presence. This kind of presence was easy to detect from someone. He tried to shake the man's arm free and run, but was chased down. It was dark. He lost his way and dove into the yard. The overgrown grass ensnared his feet. As he stumbled, he was caught. Douno lost his balance and fell into the grass. He struggled against the large man's presence weighing down on him.

"Kitagawa, Kitagawa—!"

Douno's cold lips were overlapped by another pair of cold lips. His belt was unbuckled, and his pants were yanked down. He felt something cold on his lower parts, then in the next moment, something large and hard was being pressed against it.

"Ah...!" Douno cried out in pain.

He was deeply and forcefully penetrated. Having prevented Douno from moving this way, Kitagawa tore off Douno's tie and yanked his shirt up. The rain felt cold as it hit his bare skin. But Kitagawa's hands were colder than that. Kitagawa supported Douno with his arms as he thrust his hips. Each jerking movement sent sharp pains through the region pried open to accept him, and Douno cried out in agony.

Even while being taken by force, Douno did not reject the man's kisses. He entangled his warm tongue with the other man's, and wept in pain as he embraced him.

There was an instant where their intercourse of pain turned into one of pleasure. It hurt, but it hurt and felt good. Amidst their violent and reckless sex, Douno stopped caring about what would befall him.

When the other man moved, the grass moved around him. Something fluttered onto the man's shoulder. A yellow flower petal—Douno watched it absently, then scooped it up with the tip of his tongue before swallowing it quietly.

After their animalistic act in the yard, Douno was carried by the man and taken into the house. While they waited for the bathwater to warm up, Kitagawa wrapped a naked Douno in a blanket and held him in his arms.

Once the water was hot enough, Douno was put into the bath. At first the water stung his lower parts, but he soon got used to it. They made love again in the bath. Unlike the first time, Douno did not feel like struggling anymore.

Once they were out of the bath, Douno was towelled off thoroughly and taken to the futon, still unclothed. Kitagawa was also not wearing clothes. Kitagawa slipped into the futon with Douno, and began sucking at the buds on his chest, making Douno feel like he was caring for a little child. Kitagawa did not stop there; he licked Douno's entire body like a dog. From behind his ears to between his toes, Kitagawa thoroughly licked every part of him.

Douno was flipped over onto his stomach, where Kitagawa let his tongue flicker over his stinging part before penetrating him again. Even though it really hurt, even though he cried, Kitagawa would not pull out of him.

"I love you," the man told Douno as he lay weeping against the pillow.

I love you, I love you, I love you... so many times it made his ears ache. It was strange—he felt like the words lessened the pain somehow.

Kitagawa finally fell asleep around dawn. Douno's lower parts were in such pain from the jerking movements that he could barely stand to go to the washroom. Unable to go to work, Douno called the company from Kitagawa's house and asked to have the day off. His guilt vanished as soon as he hung up the phone.

It felt chilly walking around naked, so Douno returned to the futon. Kitagawa looked like a child as he slept with his mouth open slightly. Douno needed no reason to kiss him. He did it because he wanted to.

Douno wondered what love was. Everyone used the word like the moral foundation of everything—but what was it? He definitely had loved his wife. But if someone were to ask if he

still did, he could not answer. Why? Because he had been betrayed. Because she had slept with another man. Because she had continued to betray him for two years. Her betrayal was enough to make him lose sight of his love for her. Did this mean he had never really loved her in the first place?

Was real love the kind you saw in movies and novels, when you loved one person forever? Had Douno's own love been fake?

What did he feel towards the man who was sleeping beside him now? What would he call this desire to kiss him? What would he call the feeling that seized his heart every time the man told him he loved him? Or was he simply being swept up in the man's persistent devotion, thrust upon him at a time when Douno himself had grown apathetic with despair at his wife's betrayal?

He had turned to the man because he had lost everything else—did that make him a coward? Unpleasant event after unpleasant event had swooped down on him; responsibilities had been thrust upon him. Perhaps he was just trying to escape reality by making himself think he loved this man.

If he really loved Kitagawa, he would have been able to love him ever since they were in prison. When Kitagawa confessed, he would have been able to answer with the same. After all, Kitagawa had continued to tell him he loved him ever since.

He had thought Mariko was cowardly for betraying him and unloading all of her responsibility onto him. But what he was doing was essentially the same. People didn't need to know what love was to have sex. The only difference in his case was that no one would get pregnant. Whether they had done it once or numerous times, the fact remained the same.

The more Douno thought about it, the more he wanted to cry. He thought of the life that had ended and a life that was about to begin, and about himself. His thoughts made him sick of himself, and he curled up into a tiny ball.

When Douno woke up past noon, Kitagawa was not there. Perhaps he had gone to work. Douno looked at his surroundings. In the room was the futon he was sleeping in, a narrow three-level bookcase, and nothing else. Inside the bookcase, books and sketchbooks were sorted and arranged neatly. Almost none of the books looked new, and most looked worn and tattered. There was only one new book among them. On the cover was the *Sagrada Família*, and inside, Gaudí's architectural pieces were featured with photos.

There were also many sketchbooks, close to ten. Douno extracted one from the shelf, wondering what kind of pictures Kitagawa drew. He flipped the page and was startled to see his own face. The date under the drawing was from three years ago, so he supposed Kitagawa had drawn the face from his memories in prison. Douno's head was shaven in the drawing. Feeling awkward at seeing his own portrait, Douno continued flipping through the pages, but every drawing was of him. The next sketchbook was the same. The newest one was not used up yet, and on a page midway through, a single line was scribbled across the sheet. *Starting to forget his face.*

It was impossible to take photos in prison, so Kitagawa had probably drawn his face entirely from memory. But as years passed, even that had begun to fade. From March of this year onwards, there were no more portraits of Douno's face in the half-used sketchbook.

Douno returned the sketchbooks to the shelf. Spotting no towels in the room, he opened the sliding partition to the next room, still naked. A sudden burst of sunlight dazzled him, and he closed his eyes. A TV was placed on the floor, and a small table sat in the middle of the room. There was an *engawa* porch facing the garden, and Douno could see the shadow of a broad back seated there.

The shadow turned around at the sound of the partition sliding open. Kitagawa was wearing jeans, but nothing on top.

"My clothes are gone," Douno said.

"They're drying right now."

Douno looked over to see his wet clothes drying on a line strung between two trees in the yard.

"Do you have a towel or anything?" he asked. "Even something I could wrap around my waist while my clothes dry—"

"The walls are pretty high. No one's gonna see from outside."

Kitagawa was right, there were the walls, but Douno felt unsettled walking around naked. However, as the man showed no signs of getting a change of clothes out for him, Douno resigned himself to crawling over to Kitagawa without wearing anything.

On the wooden floorboards of the porch were scattered many yellow flowers clipped at the stem. Kitagawa was binding each of them together with thread.

"A crown of flowers?"

"This is today's. Flowers wilt quickly. I figured she wouldn't like wilted ones."

Kitagawa's fingers moved nimbly.

"I heard somewhere before that thinking of someone is one way you could memorialize them. That's why I've been thinking of her this whole time while I make these."

Douno embraced Kitagawa from behind. His chest swelled with emotion, and he even teared up a bit. All the things he had mulled over endlessly—whether it was love or not, whether it was real or fake—seemed not to matter anymore.

Right now, Douno was overcome with love for the man in front of him. Purely love, and only love. That was the only reason he needed to hold the man close.

"...Don't you need to go to work?" he asked.

"I got fired," Kitagawa muttered. "I have to look for another job, or else I won't be able to pay the rent." Kitagawa placed his hand over Douno's hands around him.

"Once I found a place where I could stay for a long time, I wanted to live in a house with a yard. One with lots of grass and trees, where I could keep a dog. This is my house, but it feels lonely. I can't get it to feel warm like your house."

Kitagawa gazed out beyond the garden.

"It's lonely in a house with no people." Kitagawa's quiet voice spoke over the rustling breeze.

Douno returned home in the evening before the sun set. Kitagawa followed him out to the gate, but did not stop Douno from leaving. When Douno opened the door to his apartment, it was just as dark inside as it was outside. He turned on the light and spotted Mariko's shoes neatly placed in the doorway. It looked like she was home after all.

He entered the living room to see a shadow curled up on the sofa. Mariko had apparently sensed him from the light turning on, for she sprang up.

"Are you feeling sick?" he asked her.

Mariko shook her head.

"...Where were you last night...?" she whispered.

"I slept over at Kitagawa's place."

A look of relief crossed Mariko's face.

"I thought you weren't going to come home," she said. Her slender shoulders shook as she covered her face with her hands. "I called your work, and they said you took the day off..."

Douno put the plastic bag he had been carrying on the table.

"Have you eaten anything?"

Mariko shook her head.

"Let's eat. I just bought some stuff on the way."

They laid out the side dishes bought from their neighbourhood convenience store, and ate together. Mariko poured some tea. Once they finished eating and Mariko cleaned up, Douno began the conversation.

"I want to talk to you about something."

They sat across from each other on the sofa in the living room. Mariko kept her eyes on her feet and refused to look up.

"After that, I thought about a lot of things. About your affair, about the baby inside you, and about Honoka."

Douno paused.

"One option is for us to stay together and to raise the baby as our own. I said I wouldn't be able to love it, but maybe if I spend time with it long enough, I'd develop an attachment and would come to care about it. But though I might be able to love the baby, I won't be able to look at you in the same way as before—as my wife, or as my lifelong partner."

Mariko's cheeks stiffened.

"You might think it was just one affair. Maybe some people would be able to forgive that. But that's where our values differ."

"I..." Mariko continued in a tremulous voice. "I love you."

"Frankly, I don't understand what's going on in your heart. Feelings aren't things you can measure in the first place, so maybe it's wrong for me to say 'understand'. But one thing I know for sure is that even if we continue to be together, I won't want to protect you. I can't see you as someone precious to me anymore."

"Please divorce me," Douno told her. Mariko chewed her lip and clenched her fists.

"What about the baby?"

"I'll leave anything to do with the baby up to you."

"You're being irresponsible!" Mariko lashed out.

"But you're positive it's not my child, aren't you? You know it's his. It's wrong to ask me for a decision."

"But—" Mariko began, but Douno interrupted her.

"Once we divorce, you should remarry with that man if you can. Then, you can live as a true family. You'd have to deal with the neighbours talking here, so maybe it would be a good idea to live further away. He loves you, and he's willing to claim the child as his own, right?"

"Use your common sense!" Mariko yelled. "He's the husband of the woman who killed Honoka! I could never remarry someone like him!"

"But he says he wants you to have the baby, right?"

"But—"

Douno had thought long and hard over whether he should say this fact or not. But in the end, he chose to put it into words.

"You need to take responsibility for your actions."

Mariko chewed her lip.

"I'm not going to let you get a divorce," she murmured. "I still love you."

"I don't want to fight in court. I want to separate on good terms."

Mariko broke down into tears. Even while watching his wife weep, even while feeling pity for her, Douno told himself he could not comfort her.

"I'll hand over all of my property to you. I'm the one who brought up the divorce anyway, and once you have the baby, you'll probably need money for living."

Mariko cried and cried, then finally staggered out of the living room. He thought she had gone to the bedroom, but after a while he heard the sound of the shower.

The running water did not stop. Once Douno realized this, he dashed into the change room.⁷ The door to the bathroom was not locked. When he threw it open, the first thing he saw was the bathroom floor stained red. A paring knife lay on the floor nearby. Mariko was slumped over. When Douno gave her a shake, she appeared conscious.

Douno made a frantic call for the ambulance. Fortunately, Mariko's wound was shallow and she did not need stitches. Mariko put up a fierce fight as she was brought into the hospital, screaming at everyone to let her die. She was injected with tranquilizers, and only then did she fall asleep.

Mariko remained unconscious in a deep sleep for half a day. When she finally opened her eyes, she looked at Douno, a tear rolling down her cheek.

"The cut wasn't deep. The baby is okay, too," he told her.

Mariko pulled the sheets over her face as sobs escaped her lips.

"Your parents are coming soon. They'll take my place when they get here."

Mariko tried to sit up from her bed.

"You're not going to stay with me?"

"I have to go to work. I've taken a lot of time off already."

"I'm going to kill myself if you don't stay with me."

"Please don't make this hard for me," Douno said wearily.

"I'm serious. I will die."

Douno let out a strained sigh.

"I've talked to your parents. I've also told them I want to get a divorce. They have no problem with it."

Mariko's expression changed instantly from frail to furious.

"You made it sound like it was my fault, didn't you, telling them their daughter was the one who went and had an affair first?" she accused.

Douno did not even have to go so far as to say Mariko's affair was the reason, for it had been implied as such on yesterday's news already. Mariko's parents and Douno's parents were sure to be aware of it.

"Let's start over on separate paths," Douno said. "I don't think it was wrong for us to get married. I don't, but I think somewhere along the way, we've drifted apart."

Mariko did not agree to the divorce. Her parents arrived at six in the morning, and they switched places. Douno returned to his apartment and said his prayers to Honoka before going to work and apologizing to his boss for suddenly taking time off work the previous day.

⁷ In many Japanese households, there is a separate "change room" where you leave your clothes before you enter the bathroom (which is more like a wet room).

Douno finished work past seven in the evening and headed straight to Kitagawa's house. When he knocked on the sliding door, Kitagawa came bounding out to answer it. He was out of breath—such a small thing was still hopelessly endearing.

"What were you doing?" Douno asked.

"Reading a book," Kitagawa answered, looking at his feet.

"Have you eaten dinner?"

"Not yet."

"Let's eat. I bought some stuff."

They sat across from each other at the small table and ate. Kitagawa looked at him every so often as if to gauge his mood. The window facing the yard was open, and Douno could hear the chorus of the insects from the dense greenery outside. As if drawn to the nostalgic sound, Douno went out onto the porch after he finished eating. Kitagawa sat down beside him.

"I think I'll be divorcing my wife," Douno said, feigning nonchalance. "There'll probably be some issues along the way, but once it settles down, would you mind if I moved in with you for a bit? If I end up giving my property over to her, I'll have no money."

There was no response. Douno panicked. He could not look the other man in the face anymore, and it was not out of sheepishness.

"I'm sorry," he apologized hastily. "I understand if it's too much of a short notice. And I'm kind of taking advantage of you, aren't I, moving in with you right away like this..."

"Don't you have anything else to say?"

Douno's throat gave a loud gulp at his question. The quiet, the sound of the insects, stirred his panic even more.

"No, not really." Douno looked down and clasped his hands. They lapsed into silence again. Unable to stand the awkwardness, Douno tried to stand up, but was grabbed by the right hand.

"Where're you going?"

The man stared directly into his eyes.

"I was thinking of going home today."

"Don't go."

"But—"

He was drawn close and embraced. The man's hand snagged his belt and fumbled in a rush to take his clothes off.

"Kitagawa, I—" Douno resisted, but the man refused to listen. Partway through, Douno braced himself. He was stripped naked and made love to on the porch. As before, the pain in his lower region was enough to make it numb, but he shed no tears this time. Kitagawa released himself inside Douno twice.

After they had sex, they took a bath together. The man washed Douno's hair. Since there was no shampoo, he scrubbed Douno's head with soap, and it hurt a little.

"Don't go," Kitagawa murmured in the bath with his arms around Douno. Douno wanted just as strongly to be by his side, but he had his own reasons for wanting to go home.

"Mariko's not at home today, so Honoka's ashes will be all alone. That's why I want to go back."

Kitagawa wrinkled his brow and looked down. But he still held Douno tight.

"If you go home, I'll be by myself."

"I'll come again."

"I used to be fine alone. I was always alone. Whenever I went to your house to eat, play with your kid, and had to go home, I had this bad feeling. I feel even worse now. I feel like crying. I wonder why? You'll have sex with me, and kiss me, but that just makes it even more—"

The man looked to him desperately. Douno cradled his head and kissed him.

"Just a little bit more. You only have to wait a little bit more, and I'll come here. I'll be with you so you don't have to feel lonely."

Once he got out of the shower, Douno began to prepare to go home.

"I'm leaving now," he called hesitantly to the man, but Kitagawa sat with his back to him in a corner of the room without answering. When Douno gave up and started out the door, the man stopped him at the gates.

"Will you come tomorrow?"

"I might not be able to stay the night, but I'll drop by after work."

"Each day feels long."

Douno laughed softly. "Once you go to sleep, half of the day will be over. Then, it'll already be morning."

As the man fussed like a child, Douno consoled him by squeezing his hand, and got into the car. Kitagawa did not move from the gates, and Douno felt pained as he watched the unmoving man in his rear-view mirror. He had looked so lonely—perhaps he should have brought the man home. But by the time the thought occurred to him, Douno had already arrived back at his own apartment.

Douno was startled to see the lights on inside. Perhaps Mariko was home? Or were her parents?

When Douno entered the apartment, he saw Mariko's shoes. True, she had not been in serious condition, but he had not expected her to be home already after what happened yesterday.

"Welcome home." Mariko came out into the hallway, apparently having heard the door open. "You're home late. You haven't had dinner yet, have you?"

Mariko's attempt at acting like everything was normal was painfully unnatural.

"Actually, I already ate."

"Oh." Mariko looked at her feet. The white bandage around her wrist stung Douno's eyes.

"Then will you take a bath?"

Mariko tilted her head when Douno hesitated.

"No, that's fine, too. I'm just going to go to bed."

He slipped past Mariko. Suddenly, he was grabbed by the arm.

"Where were you?"

Her eyes looked at him severely.

"What do you mean, where...?"

"I'm asking you where you ate and where you took a shower!"

Douno's heart quaked at her sharp eye.

"You smell like cheap soap. It's nauseating. You're looking down on me because I've cheated, but you're doing the same thing."

"I'm not."

"You *are*! You're cheating too! But you go around and make it sound like it's my fault you want to get divorced. Who is it? What kind of woman is she? Tell me the truth!"

Mariko lunged at him, and Douno tumbled backwards on the floor. It hurt to be hit, but he did not try to resist. Mariko eventually quieted down and began to cry, still straddling Douno.

"You're going to say you want to separate because you love her more than me now, aren't you? No," she sobbed, "we still have our child."

Mariko stroked her belly, but the baby inside her was not Douno's child.

"I don't really know if I love this person. But I do want to be kind to him."

Mariko looked up.

"He says I just need to be there for him. That's why—"

"It's unfair," Mariko said angrily. "You're hurt, but at least you have someone you can lean on. I'm left all alone to deal with all the pointing fingers—"

It's your fault that people are pointing fingers at you. Mariko refused to look at how many people she had actually hurt through her "game": not just Douno, but her extramarital partner, and his wife—

"Who is it?" Mariko shrieked. "Where's she from? Spit it out. *Spit it out!*"

She grabbed his collar and shook him. Douno tried to remember what he loved about his wife. But even good memories with her turned muddied and grey, eaten away by the bad memories.

"Kitagawa. I ate and took a shower at his place."

Relief instantly crossed Mariko's face.

"You should have said so if you went to Mr. Kitagawa's house. You're very close to him, after all."

"I slept with him."

Mariko's face tensed.

"Kitagawa's been through a hard life. He went through a lot growing up, and he's never been loved by someone. That's why I want to be by his side."

"Wh—What are you saying?"

"When someone tells me I'm the only one for him, I want to return his feelings."

"But you're both men! And besides—"

"That doesn't matter."

Douno paused.

"That kind of stuff doesn't matter."

He shifted Mariko off of him and sat her on the floor.

"We started being intimate two days ago. I haven't separated with you yet, so I guess it might be considered an affair. I'm sorry."

Douno placed both hands on the floor, and bowed his head. Then, he looked straight at Mariko.

"Please divorce with me so I can be with Kei Kitagawa."

Mariko said nothing. She only turned her face away in silence.

The next morning, Mariko showed no signs of getting out of bed. Douno did not bother talking to her. He had a simple breakfast of toast, then left for work.

Douno finished work past seven. He wanted to go to Kitagawa's house, but he felt it was a bad idea to come home late when Mariko was home.

There was also the fact that Mariko had still not come to terms with their relationship. There was also their divorce, and several things they still had to discuss in depth.

I can't go today. Douno felt especially guilty because he had seen the man look so lonely the

day before. Feeling apologetic, he called the man's house, but no one picked up.

Concerned, he took a detour on the way home to stop by Kitagawa's house. As he sat absently waiting at a red light, he saw Kitagawa whizz by him on a bicycle.

Douno hastily rolled down the window and called out to him, but it was too late. Kitagawa had sped off in the opposite direction from where Douno was headed. It bothered Douno that the man had gone out despite their promise. Perhaps it was his own arrogance, but he could not help it. Douno turned his car around partway and began heading in the direction that Kitagawa had gone.

Douno knew Kitagawa had his own private life, and just because he had a promise with Douno did not mean he could not go out. But it still bothered him.

Perhaps Kitagawa had turned off somewhere on his bike, for Douno could not spot him anywhere. He continued to coast along in his car until he eventually reached the bridge where Honoka had fallen. He tried to turn back, then realized that perhaps Kitagawa had been heading here all along.

He had been making flower crowns every day. Maybe he had gone out to deliver today's crown.

Douno continued for the bridge. People continued to leave flowers and sweets in the middle of the large bridge. Douno spotted a bicycle and a person's figure. So Kitagawa had been heading this way after all. Douno tried to call out to him, then froze in shock. There was someone across from him. The street lights illuminated a figure—Mariko.

Douno was so shaken he could not even call out to them as he passed in his car. The two appeared not to notice him drive by. They neither turned around nor looked at him. Douno crossed the bridge and stopped his car a few dozen metres away. There were few cars on this road which ran along the ocean. He figured it would not be much of a nuisance if he parked his car here.

Douno wondered what kind of conversation Mariko and Kitagawa were having, but he hesitated at approaching them and joining in.

Douno watched the two a little ways off the bridge. The two were looking down at the river, with their hands on the railings. There was a break in the cars crossing the bridge, and a moment of silence fell. Only the street lamps dimly illuminated the two figures. Mariko suddenly glanced left and right, then pushed Kitagawa from behind. His large frame teetered forward, and he looked like he was about to fall. As he heeled and steadied himself, Mariko pushed him further.

"St—Stop it!"

Douno tore away from the railings towards them. Mariko jumped back looking astonished. Kitagawa was swinging off the railings by one hand. Douno threw the top half of his body over the rails and grabbed Kitagawa's right wrist just moments before his fingers let go. He instantly felt the weight of a whole other person pull down on right hand. The man was heavy.

"Kitagawa, can you grab something with your left hand?"

The man was too heavy to pull up. Although Kitagawa tried his best, he was unable to grasp the rails.

"Mariko, get somebody!"

Mariko stood unmoving with a pale face.

"Hurry!" he yelled. "Just bring someone!"

Douno's right hand was growing numb. He would not be able to support several dozen kilograms worth of this man's weight with one hand for long. To make things worse, the wind was

making Kitagawa's body sway back and forth.

He saw the dark water of the river below Kitagawa. Even his left hand began to grow numb from holding onto the railing, and Douno wondered if this was the end.

Hurry, somebody, please. As Douno gritted his teeth in desperation, he heard a voice.

"Let go of my hand, or you'll end up falling, too."

There was no hint of fear in Kitagawa's face as he swayed below him.

"N—No!" Douno said fiercely.

"You're gonna have a kid, right? That means your house'll be warm again."

Douno knew more than anyone else that even if the child were born, their household would not become the warm and welcoming home it had once been.

"I'm glad you were the last one to be with me."

Kitagawa exhaled.

"I'm glad I met you."

With those words, Kitagawa twisted his right wrist out of Douno's grasp. He had already been barely able to endure the weight—Kitagawa's twisting motion made him almost let go.

Douno did not want to let go of the hand he had caught. He did not want the man to go to the other side alone, just because of this.

If you'll be happy with me, I'll stay by your side. With that thought, he released his left hand from the rails. Suddenly, he felt lighter. They began falling as if they were being sucked in, and in that short moment, Douno remembered Kitagawa looking at him with an expression of disbelief.

In the few seconds until he felt the impact of the water, Douno remembered he had never said "I love you" to Kitagawa. He regretted it, but it was too late.

Takafumi, Takafumi, a voice called, shaking him persistently. When he opened his eyes a crack, he was gathered up in a suffocating embrace.

"Kitagawa..."

He was hugged so tightly it hurt. Beyond the man's shoulders, Douno could see the bridge in the distance. They had fallen, but not died. Relief washed over him, and at the same time, took all the strength out of his body.

He was soaked, but he was alive. He was definitely alive.

"You weren't moving. I dragged you all the way here."

Kitagawa's voice was trembling.

"I thought you were dead. I wondered why you had to die without me. I thought maybe I wasn't even allowed to die with you because of what I did."

Douno held the man's trembling head close.

"I love you."

The man's back shook.

"I love you. So I want to be with you."

"But there's a baby coming, right? Your wife said so. That's why she told me to go somewhere far away."

"But I want you. You're like a kid yourself, anyway, so if I had to choose one or the other, I'd take you."

"But my house isn't warm like yours. It's old, and it's not clean."

"I still want to live in your house."

Douno looked directly at Kitagawa.

"You're the one I want."

Kitagawa cried without restraint. He cried like a child. Douno held him tight, and told him over and over that he loved him.

The bridge was high up, but not high enough to die from falling off. Douno had apparently lost consciousness from shock, and if Kitagawa hadn't been there, he would probably have drowned.

When Douno had talked to Mariko about separating, she had been unable accept that Kitagawa was the person in Douno's life. That was why she had called him out and told him to leave them alone because their child was on the way. Kitagawa had remained silent, neither saying he was staying or leaving. Then, Mariko had pointed at the water below, saying she had spotted something. As Kitagawa drew close to the railings to peer over it, she had pushed him from behind.

If Kitagawa had been hurt from Mariko's act, she would have been criminally charged with causing bodily injury. However, Mariko appeared to regret her impulse, and Douno also bowed his head to Kitagawa and begged him to forgive her.

"Doesn't matter," Kitagawa had mumbled.

Douno discussed matters with Mariko on the premise that they were getting divorced. However, the situation was slow to progress, and it took about a year until their divorce was finalized.

Douno moved in to stay at Kitagawa's house before their divorce was made official on paper. Frankly, he felt suffocated living with Mariko. Ever since then, his wife had starting cooking complicated dishes and had become excessively affectionate to him as if to assert her presence. It all seemed like a lie to Douno, and he could not bring himself to thank her from his heart. He preferred eating takeout meals with Kitagawa, rather than eating Mariko's delicious cooking while constantly feeling a sense that something was not right.

When Douno began to stay with Kitagawa, he told the man truthfully that he had not divorced his wife yet, and that their discussion was going to take time. Kitagawa never asked once what was happening with Douno and his wife.

Mariko's belly swelled as talks of their divorce wore on. Mariko's parents saw this and came to him once, asking him if he would reconsider. Douno refused to change his mind.

Mariko gave birth to the child with the unknown father. Douno did not see the baby's face, but he did get news that it was a boy. After giving birth to the baby, Mariko began saying that she would not stamp the divorce papers unless Douno formally acknowledged the child as his own. This made Douno certain that the child had been the other man's.

Douno acknowledged the child as his own, and in return, he received his stamped divorce papers. It was the end of July. Douno took the stamped papers which his wife had mailed over and went to submit them to city hall during his lunch break.

Douno returned to Kitagawa's house that night, newly single, and he thought of telling the man that their divorce was now official. But he figured it would be awkward to say, "I got divorced" suddenly, but the more he tried to find the right timing, the more he began to think it did not really matter. It was just a piece of paper, after all.

"Hey."

Douno was watching TV in the living room, fresh out of a shower, when Kitagawa called to him from the porch.

"Wanna eat some pears?"

"Oh, sure."

Douno sat down beside Kitagawa. He plucked a slice of neatly-peeled pear and brought it to his lips. It was crisp, sweet, and delicious.

"So," Kitagawa began. Douno was just in the middle of scratching what felt like a mosquito bite on his neck.

"Someone abandoned a dog near our site. If it's still there tomorrow, can I bring it home?"

"Sure."

Kitagawa did not look this way, but he hunched his shoulders happily.

"You don't have to ask me for permission," Douno said. "This is your house. You should bring it home if you want to."

"Well, yeah. But I wanted to talk to you about it."

Kitagawa took Douno's right hand and brought it to his lips. His fingertips were sweet from eating the pear, and Kitagawa lapped at them like a dog.

"There's something red on your neck."

Douno touched it. "I think I got bitten."

"Want me to suck it out?"

Without even waiting for an answer, Kitagawa pressed his lips against Douno's neck. He bit down lightly, then sucked. Douno felt his skin begin to tingle, and he could no longer tell if it came from pleasure or itchiness.

Pleasure won out, and Douno's face flushed deep red. Kitagawa looked at him and laughed.

"My dream's gonna come true."

"Dream...?"

"I have a house, you're here with me, and I get to have a dog. It's just like I've been dreaming about."

His modest dream—such a small, child-like dream—pulled painfully at Douno's heartstrings. He kissed the man on the lips.

"I'm officially divorced starting today," he told the man nose-to-nose.

"...Mm-hmm, and?"

He was right. Maybe it was insignificant enough to be brushed away with an "mm-hmm". *Maybe I was the only one hung up about this.* Douno smiled wryly, and reached out to stroke the man's sun-baked temple.

"And nothing," he murmured.